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*None so Pretty*





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# *None so Pretty*

*By*

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*London*

*Chatto and Windus*

**MCMXXX**

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*To*  
J. R. MONSELL





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# *Part* I





## PART I

A MAN who had once had a price on his head, who for eleven years had been an exile and a beggar, who had had to pawn his possessions, patch his clothes and cadge his next meal, landed one summer day at Dover to be made King of England. And the country that had beheaded his father and disinherited him, ran mad with joy at his return. The streets of London and the cities and villages through which he passed were hung with tapestry and strewn with flowers; the fountains played wine; a triumph of over twenty thousand horse and foot marched before him, shouting and brandishing their swords; noblemen in cloth of gold and silver, and ladies in silk were pressed together in glittering discomfort on the balconies; aldermen in their chains of gold, the worshipful companies of tradesmen in their liveries and all the maidens of London in white waistcoats and crimson petticoats marched to welcome King Charles II.

For four days, music and fanfares of trumpets acclaimed him on his progress to the capital; and so large a part of the nation swarmed after him, dancing, capering, embracing each other in their delirium, that it took them seven hours, from two in the afternoon till nine at night, to pass through the city.

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The new King was very tired and partly deafened by all the noise. He was thirty years old, and ever since he was grown up he had been kept in his place, and that place off the throne. The English had chased him out of the country, the Scotch had dictated and preached to him, the French and Dutch had each tried to pass him back to the other as a troublesome pauper that neither wished to support. The high-spirited French Princess that his mother had tried to marry to him years ago had delighted in snubbing him as a youth not merely ineligible but gauche.

He did not find the joy of his people convincing. He remarked that his long absence from his kingdom must be his own fault, since everybody in it had always so ardently desired his return.

Sentiment had staged a very fine show for what it was worth, but what was it worth? The exact amount of the sums of money sent him from all sides as soon as it was certain he would be King of England.

He told his suite that the only event in his life comparable to the sight of that portmanteau full of coins had been one frozen Christmas in Paris when the Queen-mother had no money for firing and was forced to keep his little sister Henriette in bed out of the cold, but with only one blanket on the bed. Then someone had sent her a present of an enormously fat mutton, a dish of which he was particularly fond, and when he

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went to carve it open, there were two thousand crowns concealed in its belly.

His audience hoped much from the generous frankness of this King who need not be ashamed of having been a beggar; they were endeared to him by his simple English taste for mutton.

A few weeks after his restoration he pinned up a notice on his palace walls in advertisement of one of his many dogs, which he had come to prefer to human beings. The document ran as follows:

### LOST, STOLLEN, OR STRAYED.

We must call upon you again for a Black Dog between a greyhound and a spaniel, no white about him, only a streak on his breast, and his tail a little bobbed. It is His Majesties own Dog, and doubtless was stolen, for the dog was not born nor bred in England, and would never forsake His master. Whosoever finds him may acquaint any at Whitehal for the Dog was better known at Court, than those who stole him. Will they never leave robbing his Majesty! Must he not keep a Dog? This dog's place at Court (though better than some imagine) is the only place which nobody offers to beg.

The bitterness that inspired these pleasant thrusts was not suspected by the gentlemen who escorted the new King to London. They found him easy, open, approachable. On discovering that the ship's crew that transported him from Holland were fed on pork and peas and boiled beef, he insisted on making a breakfast of the same fare. He walked up and down the quarter-

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deck with long strides that outstripped his companions, telling tales of his ludicrous or terrible escapades. He told them well but then he had told them often, and his wit did not prevent the danger of his being a bore. It was said that he found it necessary to change his circle of acquaintance every three months, by which time he had used up his stock of stories and needed to start afresh. This explained the inconstancy of a nature that was otherwise too lazy not to be faithful. Now his royalty would indemnify him; his suite would always laugh heartily, would always answer hastily in the negative when asked if they had heard this one before. An Act of Oblivion and Indemnity absolved him, companion to that which his counsellors were urging him to pass in forgiveness of his enemies.

It would be well if the oblivion could cover his friends also. Everyone who had rendered any service to the Crown, however remote, was expecting recognition, reward, a pension, a regiment, a place at Court. He had waited eleven years for his place at Court. Now it was the others' turn. In the meantime he had enough cravats and stockings for his immediate needs, he was certain of his next dinner, and on his first night in London he went to bed with Mrs. Barbara Palmer.

The ride to London was the only occasion on which Nan Ingleby ever saw the King, and that at an age so

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young that later she could scarcely remember doing so. But this homecoming was to colour all her life.

For days beforehand she had been following the elder children about, beating drums or trays and shouting: 'The King is coming home again! hurrah! hurrah!' and their father would not let their mother beat or even reprove them for the noise they made. He told them they had all been so poor because the King was poor and so it was the right thing to be, but now they would all go to London and be rich. He would be among the first to be sent for by the King. He had no clothes fine enough for Court, he went about the house collecting and discarding them, saying to himself: 'Then they will see, *then* they will see.' His poor clothes would not matter, they would but show the clearer where his money had gone. He threw the soup his wife had made out of the window and swore they should have no more of such filthy brews from acorns and so forth, fit only for the pigs.

Lady Ingleby began to look more fiercely anxious than she had ever done during the worst times of the wars and the Commonwealth. Her family had been Puritan since the days of Bloody Mary. She had a natural taste for economy, fostered by the wars and the hard times of the Commonwealth into unnatural excesses. Once she had nearly poisoned her household with a concoction of rhubarb leaves. But her opposition

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to her husband would often drive her into common sense. She pinched her lips tight when he came running to tell her that the maypoles were set up again, that bonfires were lighted all over the country and people were drinking the King's health on their knees in the streets, that all the great nobles had gone to meet the King in Holland; then that he had set sail at Scheveling, then that he had landed at Dover, that he was coming nearer and nearer, and with him, their good fortune. He could not believe that she would not believe him, his face beamed like a great sun with laughter and triumph. Her bitter certainty of men's ingratitude fought against his hopes, and he died disappointed, proving her right.

But that was not till Nan was twelve, a long time after the King had come home, a time that seemed all the longer because there was never any minute of it when Sir Roderick did not expect a message to summon him to Court.

There he sat at the head of his table in his broad leather doublet that had been polished by long wear to a dark tan instead of chrome, a great fat man with a jolly laugh, telling them how he had hid from the Roundheads in a plot of kidney beans while his colonel ran up into the garret, or how that four-legged cavalier, Prince Rupert's white dog, Boy, used to sit up at table with him and the King, on the King's chair as likely

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as not, and fell at Marston Moor like any Christian. The superstitious Roundheads said he was a familiar spirit and 'the Mad Prince' a wizard, 'and so he may be for he's the oddest fellow, but the best to serve under that ever a man could know, and if it hadn't been for all you brats, I'd have been off to join him and his privateers long ago when he was chasing Old Noll's ships and the Spaniards too, all over the high seas.'

He would sing at table when he was merry and hopeful, when he had written another letter to some old friend now high in the King's favour and sure to see to it that the King would at last remember his services, for little Turnip or old Scatterbones, or whoever it was, had often borrowed money from him, or had stood by his side in that skirmish on the bridge, or had outwitted the ushers with him when they were at Eton together. They would remember the prayer of their college, 'their own friend, and their father's friend, and their friend's son, never to forsake.' So that at any moment now they might hear horses' hoofs clattering into the courtyard and look out of the window to see the King's messenger come to tell them all that they were to go to London and see the King and wear silk coats and jewels and ride in a painted barge on the river at night with music playing and torchlight dancing on the water. It was a changeable world and anything might happen any minute. 'Who'd have thought to



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see a great King's head on the block, and a brewer on the throne? And now that same brewer's dead body is to be hung, drawn and quartered. Up and down, that's the way of the world.

One foot up and one foot down  
That's the way to London town.

Don't you lose heart, my Nancy Pretty. You've got the world before you, and you'll be in London yet with the world at your feet.'

And he spread his hand over Nan's head as she sat perched on his knee, 'his youngest wren of nine,' as he called her, for she was small for her age, and brown, with the quick movements of a bird. She was not pretty, in spite of his other pet name for her, 'but,' said he, quoting a French soldier and writer he had met in France who was adept in the description of female charms, 'she alone in the world had embellished herself with a pointed chin.'

She tried to make her hands meet round his leather doublet which felt like the skin of a nice horse, she stroked and patted it, chirruping to him to make her ride as he had done ever since she was a baby; first as a lady, ambling and sidling all niminy-piminy, and then as a farmer trotting to market, and then as Prince Rupert leading a charge of cavalry into battle. He mimicked a dapper French regiment marching into

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the trenches to the music of violins, a custom borrowed from Spain and just suited to the Wars of the Fronde as they called them, after a kind of catapult the street boys used in Paris. A street boy's game made a very good name for their silly little civil wars, no one knew about what. And in an instant he had ceased to be the French captain, insolent and passionate, laughing and swearing and kissing his hand to his friends all in one breath, while the fiddles went 'wee wee wee' high up in his throat; and became a horrid little Parisian street boy with the fingers of one hand to his nose, and the other drawing out his catapult.

But all at once his gay humour dropped from him and he sat heavy and dejected, and Nan, who hated to sit still, remained on his knee knowing that he had gone away where she could not follow. If she spoke to him now or hugged him or tucked her head under his chin, he would either not notice or would answer with savage anger something that she could never have said, for he would not be speaking to her. But she would rather he spoke, however angrily, whoever it was to, than sit there, forgetting to finish the boat he had begun to carve for her, staring at his knife which he turned round and round in his hand so that now the curved blade and now the green bone handle would stick up out of his huge fist, while he muttered, 'After all I've done. After all I've done.'

And once he sprang up with a terrible cry, never seeing that he shook her from him, saying that all his friends had forgotten him. Soon after that, he died.

Their rector, the gentle and pious Mr. Wake, wept at the news and said he had a great heart which had been cracked by the world's unkindness. 'He died of it,' he said, 'as surely as ever any man died of a broken heart.' But Lady Ingleby said it was of drinking off a gallon of cider at a wayside inn to ward off a fit of the gout. Both reasons seemed to her equally ill-considered and unnecessary.

Men in her opinion had no stamina and no sense. Sir Roderick had wasted hours in carving lumps of wood into toys for the children, and in playing with them himself; he told them of adventures that only encouraged their wildness; puffed them up with false beliefs of their heritage to worldly glory. But that was all he did for them. He had wasted his whole substance in fighting for the King and sending money to him, so that there was none left for tutors and governors. She was too busy to look after them herself, she was all the time working up the farm, cutting down expenses, counter-ordering her husband's useless and extravagant schemes for making money, economizing in strange and devious ways. Meanwhile the children ran wild all over the country, and the two eldest boys as far as Flanders, so they wrote back afterwards, asking

for money, just when all but their mother had thought they were dead.

A King's neglect, the coldness and disloyalty of old friends, were nothing to her, as long as her eldest son was alive. She held that men were no better than children, that their wars were children's games carried into deadly earnest, made for ridiculous reasons of loyalty to a name, made to destroy her flesh and blood. Behind it all was the hope that if you stood by your King or your friend, he would stand by you. They roistered together, drank and sang a song, stood by each other in fight; and this slight thing that they called friendship, that married men in particular had no need of and no right to, since the ties of a wife and family admitted of no fanciful additions; this make-believe that was bred not of their blood and bone but of their casual company, a figment of their minds, no more; this they had invented, extolled, exaggerated, until its failure could hurt them worse than any actual misfortune.

By actual misfortune, Lady Ingleby meant hunger, illness, loss of life, land or money.

But her husband would never listen to her, he was always either up or down, fantastically merry or sullen as a bear, and sometimes he would even burst into tears, frightening the children, embarrassing and wounding her, who had never had the power to move

him thus. She had been in love with the jolly laughing young man she had married, she had been able to refuse him nothing, and he had taken it all carelessly. Almost at once she had been sick and ailing with her first child, losing her looks, terrified of losing his love, the strong-minded young woman who had lorded it over her younger brothers and sisters, changed to an anxious, nervous, morbidly sensitive woman. She regretted and resented her surrender, she would never be happy she thought until he loved her more, or she loved him less. The latter conclusion was the easier, she reached it with the birth of her first baby, and in a savage triumph transferred her devotion to this helpless object. She could salve her pride with the plea that her passions had been merely the unworthy means to this necessary end.

But there had been more passions and more necessary ends, too many of them; once you had given yourself you were never free again, never free from anxiety, suspicion, struggle; her babies' illnesses, her husband's casual infidelities, quarrels and rupture in the State, rumours of war, battles, she was vulnerable to them all as to a personal attack, she could never escape them, she was never free again. And it all came of giving oneself to a man, since of necessity he loved more lightly, both his wife and children; he could afford to be inconstant, to share out his affections with occasional mistresses, with friends, with the King and his cause.

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Because he could not conceive and bear a child, this vain idle-witted talkative man who could never know her grim sense of responsibility, and who went to pieces in time of trouble, yet had the advantage of her.

It was for this that Lady Ingleby had never forgiven her husband. A family of fourteen left her little chance of ignoring, as her kind have since attempted, that woman as receptacle of man's seed, is by just that much dependent on his whim. For that reason she was passionately of the opinion of a contemporary of hers, though she had never heard of it or him, who 'could be content that we might procreate like trees without conjunction.'

Children were as unsatisfactory as husbands, it was of little use to expect anything else, she might tell them to be grateful a dozen times a day and they would never understand it until they had children themselves and saw what was the use of it.

Her eldest, Kate, had long ago married, first of all as was right and proper, and her second Dorothy had died of her illegitimate child, as was equally right and proper. All the times she had asked what girls were coming to since the war, she had never supposed her girls could come as far as that. A direct result of the war it had been, with all those soldiers and indigent cavaliers left wandering about for years after it was over.

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If Kate were balanced by Dorothy, Eliza, whom she had as good as given up hope of marrying for all her good looks, was balanced by Molly, her best bargain. That again was right and fitting for she had the best market value in every way. She was not as handsome as Eliza but she was softer, more approachable, which more than compensated for any inferiority noted by her mother's appraising eye in the spacing of her forehead, the size of her eyes and the shape of her ears. She was quick too and clever, and fortunately for her, Eliza, who was her immediate elder, and had always considered herself as specially responsible for her little sister, had insisted on her attending the Reverend Mr. Wake's lessons as regularly as herself.

That benevolent old gentleman cared only for roses and fishing and virtuous living. His happy disposition had remained unsoured by the nine wounds, twenty-nine imprisonments, and double sentence of death by hanging, drawing and quartering, which he had received in the wars. He gave proof of it by offering to teach any of the children from Ling House who wished it. But they were so idle and played truant so often and Mr. Wake hated so much to report their deficiencies to Lady Ingleby, whom he regarded as the most dreadful and also ineffectual she-dragon he had ever encountered, that Eliza and Molly were the only two who profited by it, by reason of Eliza's studious

tastes and her affection for her sister. Eliza indeed had the makings of a scholar, Mr. Wake had declared.

And whatever Eliza did, Molly would begin to do too, and more quickly, but would go no farther than the exact point which she judged might be of use to her, for she had her mother's rather short-sighted eye for a bargain, and was of no mind to spend any labour that was unlikely to be profitable.

Thus when Lady Ingleby succeeded in inveigling a distant cousin into a visit to Ling House and an alliance with one of its daughters, it was the younger Molly who impressed him with beauty and wit, where her elder sister struck him only as an abrupt, awkward girl. Eliza in her arbitrary fashion quarrelled with Molly for marrying 'a wretched little numskull of a man,' as though the girl could do anything else but what she was told, even if she had been fool enough to wish to. Molly transferred her allegiance from Eliza to her mother, for now that she was a rich merchant's wife in a country house in the village of Kensington, near London, it was necessary to have someone at home to shock and delight with her tales of impropriety and splendour.

A meditative and even philosophic mood is induced in the most practical minds by the endless process of preserving plums and curing bacon, mutton and beans for the winter. Standing at the long table in her



still-room, gaunt, weary, her hooded eyes fixed on her occupation, Lady Ingleby would repeat to herself some account of a rout or visit to a great house that Moll had paid, or Maria as she now called herself, to the derision of the younger members of her family who dubbed her Mollietta Maria or the Queen-mother. Her letters gave Lady Ingleby a pleasure such as she had never had from her eldest son. She loved him too much. Anxiety, anguish and then bitterness had been his filial offering.

Since daughters did not matter so much, they were perhaps more satisfactory, she decided in the monotony of her still-room. But then Eliza's dark head went past the narrow window, moody, defiant, and Lady Ingleby revoked her decision. Eliza would not listen to Molly's letters, she snorted when her mother called her Maria; she stalked on her solitary way, paying no attention to anyone, saying she wished she were a man, but refusing to speak to one. Her mother was sure that girls had never been like that in her day.

Five in a bed was not an excessive allowance in those days when beds were enormous but few, and children many. The younger children of Sir Roderick and Lady Ingleby all slept together in the four-post bed in the west room, when at last they had been herded home, for Nan and the boys would run with the village

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children till any hour in the late summer dusk, playing I Spy or Hare and Hounds or Jacob's Ladders.

There were the two younger sisters, Alice and Nan, and then the three little boys, much younger than they, for the two children born after Nan had died in infancy. Alice was two years older than Nan, and had always wanted to sleep with her elder sisters instead and share their secrets. She called the others the children and was always telling them to be quiet and let her go to sleep, but they never regarded her. They laughed and kicked and fought for the inside places on cold nights and there whispered stories of goblins who might creep up from under the bed, and pull the blankets away from the vanquished ones on the outside. So that the struggle for warmth and safety would begin all over again until Nurse would hear them and come up and scold them, her cap nodding over her candle as she poked it through the curtains, lighting up their snug, secret room and all the grinning faces on the long bolster, and all the hands that shot out, clutching at her apron as she turned to go.

'Nurse, Nurse, just one story.'

'Well, what shall it be then?'

'Tell us how you were fetching peas in the field and heard the poor reverend gentleman roaring for help.'

For that was how Nurse always referred to Mr.

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Wake, whom she had heard a-bellowing and a-hollering on a Monday afternoon many years ago. Down went her basket and all the peas scattered, and off she ran to the gate and there snatched up a corn-pike and so with all her petticoats bundled up round her waist, and leaping like a hare (though Nan saw it more like a cow) she skedaddled down into the road and there saw poor Mr. Wake with all his fishing things tumbled in the mud and he lying flat in the midst of them, knocked to the ground, shot through the top of the head, and wounded in nine places though none fatally, and all by that rascally Roundhead Captain Moreton who stood over him with his pistols, daring him to rise, as if the poor clergyman were capable of such a thing.

‘Ah, but it was his turn to roar when I got him in the back with my pike. Down went his pistols, and off he ran down the road with a noise like a mad bull, and me after him, but never got another chance to spit my fine beef.’

‘Yes, but you’ve left out what he said.’

‘There now, you’re remembering it all and telling me to tell it again. What *was* it he said, now——’

‘Hag, harridan, bitch, witch,’ they shouted, for this was part of the game, and Nurse was in honour bound to forget her story just at this point. Once again the bully fled and the stout heroine pursued; the Reverend William Wake, a pleasant true-hearted parson if ever

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there was one, was induced to sit up and sip brandy, admitting mildly that the Captain's attack had been 'somewhat to his detriment,' and recovered to continue his turbulent career until peace restored him to his roses.

'True it is what Sir Roderick says, we live in stirring times.'

'*You* did,' said Nan, who always wished she had been in the wars.

Then Nurse tucked them in all over again, saying she would slap hard any hand that was now put outside. So that they had now to lie very still and only whisper, pretending that they were hiding from Old Noll who had had a wart on his nose as big as a walnut, which the Devil had made when he pricked him for his own and made him swear to eat nothing but children for supper ever since, and so he still did, now he was in Hell. Or they were Hop o' my Thumb and his nine brothers and sisters in the great bed where the ogre had put them when he meant to come at night and chop off all their heads at one blow. At this point little Frank always began to whimper, nor would he be comforted by the assurance that the ingenious Hop o' my Thumb contrived that the ogre should instead cut off the heads of his own ten children, all asleep in their bed.

Each tried to frighten the others most. The familiar

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places in their countryside became strange and terrible. A wizard lived inside Gaddiscombe Hill where they played at Tom Tiddler's Ground by day, picking up buttercups and daisies instead of gold and silver. Old Mary down in Long Lane turned into a black cat at night and had cursed Farmer Dray's dog for chasing her, so that it ran mad and died. Whoever fell asleep under the hollow thorn-tree on the common, woke to find that nobody remembered them, that their playmates were old and shrivelled and the world was all different. They could see the thorn-tree through their own window if they craned their necks at the left-hand corner, and Jamie once tried so hard that he got his head caught between the bars. The common went up and down in a dark waving line against the evening sky, and just in the tail of the left eye was the thorn-tree, flinging out its crooked fingers as though it beckoned them.

Nan would lie with her knees hunched up though they all complained of the cold hollow it made in the bedclothes. 'That is the hill the King marched over,' she said, and she saw him going away over the hill, after one look at her (for her father had always declared that the King had looked straight at her as she sat perched upon his shoulder) going away to London, and all the world running after him, spreading itself vaster and vaster, like a peacock's tail, dancing and

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shouting as though they were mad. And she and her father had never yet gone to London, but one day they would, and see the King again.

One foot up and one foot down  
That's the way to London town.

She marched two fingers up over the mound of blankets she had made with her knees, but before she could reach the top the others would make her put her arm into the bed again so as not to pull the clothes away from them.

She was a troublesome bedfellow for even when she lay still and silent she could brew mischief, against herself as well as them, for she would lie staring at the columns of solid blackness made by the bedposts until some trick of reflected moonlight through their broken window-shutter made her fancy she saw a hand round the post. She had known quite well what it was, but the more she said to herself, 'Yes, it is like a hand,' the more she began to believe it was a hand, and presently she thought the hand had shifted, it was higher up, until suddenly she terrified herself and the others by shrieking, 'Look, look! There is a pair of hands climbing up the bedpost.'

At that they all screamed, Nurse came running, and thankful they were to see her however she might punish them. Even their mother was only another

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human being. And following their mother was their father, striding in among this mess of squalling brats and questioning, scolding women. He would not heed who had said what and who was to blame, he took the chief culprit on his knee and told her in a rather thick voice that she was a brave girl and so should not be frightened, and that she was the apple of his eye. There were no punishments, there were no more scoldings even, they were all put back into bed and the blankets tucked round them, and Nan shut her eyes tight and tried to see apples instead of hands, clusters of crab-apples hanging on a branch, as small and red as cherries but sour to taste, apples stored in the loft in heaps and rows, apples of love, which she had heard was the name of a new red juicy fruit that had come from Italy and was not sweet. It was odd that apples of love should not be sweet, and what was the apple of one's eye?

As they grew older, she and Alice should have gone together as Eliza and Molly had done, and before them Kate and Dorothy who were so much older and by now so long departed, the one of them married and other dead, that they hardly counted. But Alice found Nan childish and unsympathetic. She herself was gentle and religious; she said she would never marry anyone who had not a high forehead and sad, beautiful eyes like the picture of the Blessed Martyr King Charles,

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graven on the silver medallion that her father wore always on a thin chain hidden beneath his clothes.

But Nan could not bear to hear how the late King was led to his death on a snowy morning to the sound of muffled drums, how before he started he asked only for an extra shirt so that he should not shiver with the cold and be thought to have trembled with fear. She could see the reproachful, patient eyes, the white lace on black velvet, the black velvet moving slowly over the snow under a grey sky between the ranks of Cromwell's Ironsides, and Cromwell standing there, no longer the Old Noll, the nursery bogey, but an odiously solemn figure, almost as much a martyr as his victim, saying portentously, 'It is a stern necessity.'

Nothing there of the exultation of the conqueror, of the despair or fury of the conquered, just each behaving perfectly. She cried too at hearing of it, but passionately, indignantly,—'Could nobody do anything? Didn't he even curse Old Noll for a traitor? Oh I hate it, I hate your old King,' and she stamped at Alice whose tears ran down her face in silence, 'your wretched sad old King.' She asked for stories instead of the gay and gallant young Prince who had wandered defeated for six weeks in England with a heavy price on his head, disguised as an ostler, as an old woman, even as a Roundhead, gravely rebuking his company for swearing.

"He is far better than the old King."



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'He is not,' cried Alice, showing spirit.

'He is, I say. He is alive for one thing and that alone is better.'

For love of the late King, Alice had committed her only crime. She had stolen her father's precious copy of the Eikon Basilike, the book of prayers which King Charles had written with his own hand in prison, giving, as the title page averred, 'the Pourtraicture of His Sacred Maiestie in His Solitudes and Sufferings.' It had been privately circulated among his faithful adherents, it was dangerous even to own a copy, but many read aloud from it to their household every evening. Sir Roderick did not go as far as that, nor indeed to read it at all after his first essay to conquer the tedium ordained by loyalty. But he kept his copy religiously under the false bottom of the linen-press, from which Alice secretly extracted it and in exquisite tremors at the enormity of her guilt and the nobility of its cause, kept it hidden under sprigs of rosemary in an old box in the attic. When the noise of the others at play made her head ache, she would steal away up the rickety wooden stair, and sitting under the ten beams that met in five sharp angles like the spread fingers of two hands touching at the tips, she would draw the book from its hiding-place and spell out a word here and there that had been written by the Royal Saint, wishing that she herself could die a death

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as noble, as heroically submissive, as magnificently spectacular. The sunbeam that fell across her fair hair from the dusty window made a halo round her head and seemed to her a heavenly promise of an early and much-mourned death, such as the Princess Elizabeth had died, at fourteen, in the grim old castle of Carisbrooke, with her pale cheek resting on her father's Bible, his last gift to her before his execution.

But Alice could not die of a broken heart for her own father's death. He had been too rough and careless and noisy; and there was nothing tragic about him and his great laugh. She rested her pale cheek on the book of the Princess Elizabeth's father.

There Nan discovered her, but did not give her away, nor even laugh at her except at first. But Alice forgot to draw herself up or turn into a haughty elder sister. She had clutched the book to her and said, 'Don't tell, don't let them take it away.'

'I won't tell,' said Nan, staring at the thing that had transfigured her usually pale and passive sister; 'let me hold it once.'

She held it. She said, 'They say that before the King came home, they would have hanged one for keeping this. I won't tell,' she added again, and put it away herself in the box and laid the dried rosemary over it.

She wished that she herself had a secret treasure, one that it was life to keep and death to have discovered.

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But she did not want the book and could not think what such a treasure could be. She went rather slowly out of the attic, and no one else discovered Alice's secret for two and a half centuries, when it was sold to an American for a sum that would have made Sir Roderick's fortune ten times over.

Alice remained by the window until presently she heard Nan shouting to her brothers in the yard below, and saw her come running through it and down into the hayfield with the boys and dogs round her. She had wished to kiss Nan as she laid the book in the box and said she would not tell, now Nan was running away from her and she felt they would never meet again. She was lonely and envious of the other's vigour, she thought that perhaps after all she would rather live and go to London.

Death or life, which should she choose? For to her, as to Nan, the world lay before her, she could do as she liked. They lay in bed that night holding each other's hands, thinking that as soon as they were old enough they had only to hold them out and take what they wished.

One night when the little boys were asleep, Nan whispered to her, 'I have a secret to tell you. One of us is to be married but I don't know which.'

'It is I of course. I am the elder.'

## NONE SO PRETTY

‘Yes, but our mother thinks it may be well to be rid of me first. I heard her talking of it with Nurse. I was under the window. Nurse thinks it should be you.’

‘Who is the bridegroom?’

Nan had not heard this point mentioned, but hoped it might be some London gentleman, for her mother was reading to herself a letter from Mollietta Maria as though it bore on the matter, and cackled like a turkey hen, though she would not tell Nurse why.

Next week they heard that Tumbleton Park was to be sold, which had belonged to Sir Roderick’s estates since the Wars of the Roses. He had refused to allow it to go. The week after, they were told that one of them also was to go, with the Park, to Mr. Hambridge of Cricketts Manor. He had visited their mother on business one day when they had all been sent out on a picnic. They had once seen him at Rampton Market a year before when they had gone in to sell old Ginger, and he was there for a cock-fight. Nan had noticed a burly, red-faced man who stood among the market stalls and shouted in a jolly way to the man who owned the rival cock. That had reminded her of her father, and she had felt sympathy with him when instead of talking to her mother, who was being very polite to him, he turned his back on them and trudged off with his opponent for a drink together. But she did not wish to marry someone who lived not

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so very far from home, and who, for all she knew, never went to London.

The girls waited in a very different suspense to hear which was to be bride; both were disappointed it was Nan.

With the example of Eliza before her, Lady Ingleby had seen that Nan also might early become unmanageable, and what was worse, unmarriageable. Alice, though older, was docile and fair-haired and should make an easy match, though it was difficult to tell. Young people changed so fast nowadays, and sentiment no longer had the marriage-marketable value it had possessed in her young days. Men now liked girls to be brisk and lively, and nobody cared about the martyred King. 'It is positively *démodé* to be beheaded,' Maria had written in proud quotation from a friend at Court. That had been her contribution to the marriage problem, and it had startled Lady Ingleby's jealous resentment against the Stuarts into a delighted chuckle.

Alice's envy encouraged Nan. She was to have Moll's wedding-dress and a gold ring, she was to leave home, and take Nurse with her, for it was not fitting that she should go alone to a house where there were only two men beside the servants. The rectory at Cricketts had never been rebuilt since it was burnt down in the wars, and so the present rector lived at Cricketts Manor as its chaplain. And Nan was to be mistress of this

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house with two men to amuse her and only Nurse to check her.

She was now seventeen, and still played and even fought sometimes with the village boys as though she were just the same as they; nor did they appear to notice any difference. But on the morning of her wedding, which Lady Ingleby had hurried on to take place in the early autumn, young Diggory the dairy boy, whom she had never noticed except to run races with him, suddenly kissed her. It was very early and the air still cold and misty, for they were all up and scurrying since before dawn, and every minute Lady Ingleby found that something had been forgotten or done in the wrong way. Nan had run into the dairy, and there she saw Diggory with a great bowl of cream in his hands and a flower in his smock and his round eyes staring at her. She laughed at his face for it looked so solemn and so well scrubbed for her wedding that it was even redder than usual; it grew still redder, he dropped the bowl, his arms were flung up and out like a windmill and then round her. At the same instant one of the maids outside started bawling to him for the cream, which was spreading over the stone floor in a thick pool. Lady Ingleby screamed when she saw it and set on Diggory with both fists, but Nan pulled her off him, though she had to stuff one hand into her mouth to keep from laughing, and said it was her fault,

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she had bumped into Diggory as she ran into the dairy to ask for the cream and had knocked it out of his hands. She could afford to be generous since she knew her mother would not dare give her so much as a box on the ear, lest she should show red eyes at her wedding.

The wedding itself was disappointing. When Moll was married, they had had fiddlers from Rampton, and the dancing and junketings had been carried on till far into the night. All the girls had helped put Moll to bed, and when she had thrown the stocking, they had all scrambled for it with as much noise as a pack of hounds, and joked to each other about their gallants in a free and hearty way that made Nan wish she were old enough to have a gallant to joke about too.

But Mr. Hambridge insisted on bringing his bride home that very same day, and Lady Ingleby was not sorry as it lessened the expense. She told people that he was bashful, as indeed he showed himself, that she thought it a very good thing in a husband, that for her part she had no liking for revelry at a wedding, for it was a solemn duty and should not be confounded with pleasure, let alone licence. She spoke sincerely, for deep in her mind was the belief that such jollities lessened woman's importance; and even Nan, the youngest, wildest and flightiest of her daughters, should have honour as her representative. She had always longed

to be taken seriously, to be revered. She would have been happy as the wife of a submissive Victorian husband, who would help her bear an equal number of children but would ignore all reference to the lusts of the flesh and speak only of the glory of womanhood.

Whichever factor, purity or economy, was responsible, Nan drove away in the afternoon in the hired coach from Rampton with wheels newly painted yellow for the occasion, and Jake the driver flourishing a bunch of white ribbons on his whip. She held in her arms a very small rose-tree in a neatly fluted stone pot, which Mr. Wake had given her with injunctions to water it twice a day with good rain-water, and never with her tears, 'for,' said he in his slow chanting voice, 'a rheumy salt is bad for tender plants.'

He had been recalled somewhat late from a more important occupation to conduct her wedding, and in mistake had given out Sir Philip Sidney's hymn about 'dead men's undelightsome clay,' which upset Lady Ingleby but pleased Nan who liked the puns in the first verse.

Her three younger brothers, Chris and Jamie and little Frank, had given her a kite they had made by themselves without telling her. She had always helped make their kites before. Alice had given her her pet kitten, and Eliza a ribbon she had bought from a pedlar, a buff one spotted with small fruits, cherries, strawberries or apples, Nan could not be sure which, but



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they were red and bright. This feminine gift from Eliza was surprising, but she showed no other sign of her good will and yawned unashamedly like a dog all through the wedding.

They were all sleepy. Nan nodded over her rose-tree in the coach. The lumpy road and the unsprung seat jolted her up and down, nevertheless she fell into a drowsy dream that she was driving to London beside her father. She woke to see Nurse opposite, and beside her a big burly man who was otherwise not at all like her father, for he had not a word to say and looked out of the window away from her all the time, and when she once spoke to him, the back of his neck and as much of his cheek as she could see turned a rich pink. She had heard of a blushing bride but never of a blushing bridegroom, and it was the more perplexing as Mr. Hambridge had struck her as quite old, thirty at least.

At last they drove through a village which must be Cricketts, for all the people were out in the road, cheering and tossing up their caps or their handkerchiefs. At this Mr. Hambridge showed sudden and surprising life, for he thrust his head out of the window and bawled back to them with a View Halloo as though he were urging on a hunt. Nan looked out of the other window, and saw them all laughing and running after the coach. Soon the runners dropped behind, the coach

went along bare road again with flat marshland on either side, flatter than at home. It turned sharply through a pair of gates that stood open ready for it, but no one was there to hold them back or bob a curtsy or cheer, though Nan scarcely noticed this at the moment, so excited was she suddenly with her arrival at the house and wonder what it would be like.

A slovenly cottage stood by the gates, and some ragged fowls ran squawking from before the coach. A large pale girl stood inside the doorway, staring out at them with stolid indifference. There were rings on the shapeless white hand which she held to her breast. The coach rattled past her, up a long straight drive of beech-trees, through which Nan could see the flat fields, lit by the slanting rays of the sun. It turned into a courtyard, drew up with a grind on the cobbles, and fluster and welcome began. The door was flung open, the grinning new faces of servants surrounded her. She stepped down and looked round at the fat white pigeons that strutted and fluttered about, and among them a very fine black cock with his scarlet comb; at the crack in the mounting block where ivy was growing in a dark streak; at the square stone house and round steps curving below the front door.

Some old man was nudging Mr. Hambridge and reminding him that he ought to carry his bride over the threshold, but he pretended not to hear or under-

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stand, and Nan knew it was pretence because he looked so sheepish. She would not wait for him to do it, she ran up the steps and in through the doorway where she stood laughing as her husband came slowly after her. He looked at her like a dog who has been scolded, and muttered on a gruff, unhappy note, 'Welcome to Cricketts. And now for God's sake let's to supper.'

She was taken up into a strange bedroom and ran to the window. Here homesickness fell on her suddenly and stiflingly. Never again would she look out of a window with a broken shutter and crane her neck for a glimpse of the hollow thorn-tree; never again would she see that wild, familiar strip of common, jagging up and down against the evening sky; never again would she jump into bed with her brothers and sisters and lie telling stories in the dark.

What she saw now was a lawn just below her, and a wall that went round it, shutting it into a square, and beyond it, marsh or common land and a winding path that showed faintly white in the shadow of the low hill up which it climbed.

'Nurse,' she said in a choked voice, 'do you remember the nights when the sky was red?'

'Why yes, bud, we are none of us likely to forget that, and all we heard afterwards.'

'Did they see it here too, from this window?'

Nurse assured her that certainly that terrible light

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had been seen here too. For four nights it had glowed for fifty miles round London, so that the sky was like the top of a burning oven; some said the reflection had been seen as far as Scotland. A dreadful fate had befallen the city, it had been destroyed utterly by fire, some said it was the judgment of God on the modern Babylon, and Mr. Wake said that according to a learned London dean, the city had been reduced from a folio to a duo decimo.

Soon the pedlars and packmen and then the children in the village were singing a new song:

London is burning! London is burning!  
Look yonder! Look yonder!  
Fire! Fire! Fire! Fire!  
Go fetch me some water!

The light of its ruins had been all that Nan had ever seen of London; she had watched it with terror but also with joy. It consoled her now to think that it had been seen from here also; she was looking at a new place, but it had been there all this time though she had not known of it, and if she had been here a few years ago, she would still have seen London burning.

As soon as Mr. Hambridge led Nan into the oak room he became boisterous and hearty, for there were the familiar faces of men he knew to give him confidence. Nurse was no longer with her, there were only

men servants in the long, dark room, and the chaplain, Mr. Benjamin Cork, to whom Mr. Hambridge showed his bride, saying: 'There she is and Tumbleton Park with her, so the bargain's none so bad as you might think.'

Nan stood very still; only her eyes moved fast round the room, up at the gamekeepers' and hunters' poles that rested against the dark panels, at the staring men servants in greasy doublets, at a leather hat full of pheasants' eggs left on a shelf, at the chaplain's grave face, so high up that it seemed to be looking down at her from the top of a pole.

Mr. Cork was as tall and thin as Mr. Hambridge was square. Ambition, pride and disappointment had eaten away his flesh and now burned in his sunken eyes. Under their gaze, the bride's wandering curiosity flickered and waned; she looked down, and with an unwonted bashfulness tugged at the white brocade which was slipping down over her thin shoulder. The full flowing style of the time did not suit her, and this dress was much too large, though it had been cut down twice over, first for Moll and then for her; it had had the stained parts cut out and the clean sewn together again and still it did not fit. She would have looked better in boy's dress, and from her sudden movements when at last she came to the table, one might have thought her accustomed to wear it. Some such thought

slipped in at one side of the chaplain's mind and came out at the other as 'unwomanly.'

Like Nan's dress, the heavy oak table was too large for its present purpose. For that reason, Nan, or Mrs. Anne as she now was, did not sit far away at the other end of it, but on Mr. Hambridge's right hand, facing Mr. Cork. The sense of her husband's remark had not penetrated her confused consciousness; from his tone she had supposed him to be making some appropriate jest such as the many she had heard at her wedding, and the sharp white teeth that were her only beauty had flashed into a propitiatory smile.

'She is a fool,' thought the chaplain, but changed it as they seated themselves, to—'She is half asleep.'

She woke up however at the sight of the pickled oysters. Mr. Hambridge roared to Giles, the old man who had spoken to him in the courtyard, to know if they had been gutted, for sure he ought to know that oysters the same as any other fish would stink if they were not gutted. He watched Nan in the tail of his eye to see if she laughed, but Nan was too ignorant of oysters to understand that it was a joke, though presently she saw old Giles grin and wag his jaw, and then as Mr. Hambridge shouted with laughter, all the serving-men laughed too.

The three fed in silence after that, while the last ray of the sun slid from the rusty pike-heads against

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the walls and lit up the dust in the lower corners. The serving-men stumped in and out, breathing heavily. There were more of them than at home, but they were just as uncouth and shabby; they carried a quantity of fine silver dishes and some even of gold, but her mother would have remarked on their dullness. Even for a wedding they had not been well polished. Mr. Hambridge could never have melted down his plate to send to the King in exile as her father had, down to the Italian dish that King Harry had given his great-great-grandfather. No wonder Mr. Hambridge was so rich, yet everything here was as old and musty as at home, and certainly her mother would never have let the dogs fight over the bones under the table, but have saved the bones for soup.

‘And eggs in a hat,’ she said to herself, reviving with food and wine, ‘what *would* she say to eggs in a hat?’

She had to give some reason for the chuckle that had broken from her and directed Mr. Cork’s scrutiny upon her. She said: ‘This is the first time I have eaten to-day, there has been such a to-do,’ and she began to laugh again from a sudden secret fund of enjoyment, for she had just remembered how Diggory had kissed her in the dairy and upset the cream. She stopped as suddenly, and looked so unnaturally solemn that Mr. Cork had an uneasy suspicion she might be mimicking

him. Mr. Hambridge looked at her over his lowered tankard, but as she did not say what had caused her laughter, he avoided her eyes lest they should spy out occasions in him for ridicule. For a moment both the men were nervous of her, and sulky. She could feel the antagonism caused by their shyness, but did not know why it was. She was afraid they thought her a zany for laughing at nothing, but she could not tell them the reason. She tried to give others instead, to describe the bustle before the wedding, how everything had gone wrong and her mother had had a small fit of hysterics just before starting for church, because the forgetful Mr. Wake had been seen strolling down towards the river with his rod and line and basket at the moment when he should have been getting into his surplice.

Mr. Hambridge said, 'Yes, yes,' hurriedly as she spoke, and 'Very fine, ha ha,' but not as though he were listening. Mr. Cork looked at her the most, though in a way that made her feel of less importance rather than more, especially when she spoke of her mother's hysterics. Yet she felt obliged to look at him, but only when he was not looking, for there was something strange and secret about him which made her feel she had to be strange and secret too. It did not seem as though these two men would amuse her, or she them. The dusty sunbeam slipped out of the room,



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which now grew very dark though it was still light outside.

'If I find no pleasure in marriage,' she thought, 'I will dress up as a boy and run away to sea.' Women had done it, why not she?

As soon as she could, she left the table, and Nurse, who was in the hall, took her up to her room.

'Nurse,' she said, 'what shall I do? My husband does not like me, and this house is duller than at home. I don't believe anything could ever happen in it.'

She had sat herself on the side of the great bed and was thumping her fists against it. 'Look at those curtains,' she said, 'they are tapestry and falling to pieces. Moll wrote that all the world in town are having the new-fashioned moiré silk hangings.'

'It isn't curtains with French names that will make your bed easy,' said Nurse. 'But as your mother has made it, so you must lie on it.'

'Look, Nurse, is that a tree in the pattern or a stag? No, it is a stag but it has branches growing out of its antlers. What is that story? Don't you know?' Her voice dropped in disappointment but awakened again in pleasure at the discovery of round tawny fruits hanging from the leafy branches that surrounded the stag. She wondered if he had eaten enchanted fruit which had caused branches to grow from his horns. That the hangings were old-fashioned and dingy was

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now of no matter; her real disappointment had been that everything here was so like home, and she had expected marriage to be the first step into a new world. Still, she was mistress of her own house now, whatever it was like; she had Nurse with her and no one to scold or beat her except her husband, and he did not strike her as likely to do so. Remembering her new freedom, she began to jump up and down on the side of the bed, singing:

My lady's mother's made my bed,  
My lady's mother's made my bed,  
And since I'm none so pretty,  
Why then, it's none so hard.

Dissatisfied with her lack of a rhyme, she tried to find one,—‘red,’ ‘dead,’ ‘Ned.’

‘Why then I’ll lie with Ned.’

But who is Ned? Isn’t the blacksmith, Ned? Nurse, do you hear? The blacksmith is my bridegroom, and I’m sure he’s no worse than Mr. Hambridge who can’t drink without making a noise.’

Nurse told her she was a mad thing and must stop that romping and caterwauling and let herself be undressed, for brides had to be abed early. And then, grumbling and stooping, as she pulled off a stocking or picked up a garter, Nurse began to drop bits of advice and warning, from which Nan gathered that

her duty as a wife was always to be very loving to her husband and never to notice if her husband were not loving to her. 'Many of the best marriages have begun no better,' said Nurse, 'and look what the Queen herself had to put up with at first, our King, God bless him, thrusting his whore into her service, so that she used to sit alone weeping in her chamber all day on a bed that cost eight thousand pounds.'

'If I was the Queen and all the Court round me, I'd not sit weeping alone on my bed whatever it cost.'

'Don't you take me up so, Mrs. Impudence. Well they say they're mighty loving now and he won't put her away for all she's borne him no children.'

'He said he thought they had brought him a bat instead of a woman,' said Nan sadly, for she wondered if Mr. Hambridge had thought her like a bat. Nurse knew her well enough to read her thought.

'Didn't your father call you his Nancy Pretty and say you were the pick of the whole basket, and the Lord knows there are enough to choose from? You're as brown as a berry but you're as firm and sweet as a nut, and it's a rotten tooth that would choose a shaking white jelly instead of such as you.' And Nurse banged the shoes together down on the floor and came and stood over Nan as she lay in bed, with her arms akimbo like the comic square figure of Henry VIII that Sir Roderick had once cut out of cardboard.

‘What is a shaking white jelly?’ she asked sleepily.

‘Half the fine ladies to-day from what I’ve heard tell,’ said Nurse, in a grim, say-no-more-about-it tone. Yet she seemed about to say a great deal more. She opened her mouth once or twice but shut it again very firmly and stood there doggedly, as though she were listening, waiting to hear someone else say what she would not. Framed in her white cap, her face looked almost the colour of earth. The nose is a hill in the middle, thought Nan, and the eyes are two little pits, and two deep ditches run from the nose to the mouth, which is a ridge where they haven’t quite cut all the corn (for Nurse had a distinct moustache) and the forehead—but she could not find words even to herself to express her pleasure in the forehead with its two big bumps or mounds and all the fine lines running parallel in that broad expanse as it swept upwards just like a ploughed field to the white cloud of a cap.

When Nurse left her, she lay alone in the strange bed that her mother had made for her, and wondered now not what adventures she should choose, but what would come to her. Presently she would hear her husband’s step on the stairs, he would turn the handle and come up to the curtains and draw them back and put his arms round her and kiss her as young Diggory had done this very morning in the dairy. She thought now that she liked Diggory’s kisses, that she would

like them better from someone she did not know to be a dairy boy, stuck for ever in the same place like a clod in the earth, she would like them from someone who was not her husband, from someone she did not know at all. Her face grew hot in the darkness, her heart beat, thumping out the seconds; she heard a board creak under a heavy tread and suddenly she felt cold and rigid; all curiosity fell from her and she was only desperately afraid. But nothing happened and nobody came, the darkness remained thick in front of her, until once again she saw a lighter patch on the bed-post, a patch that might perhaps be the shape of a hand. She would not look at it, there were no companions now to be frightened with her, and if she called out in her fear, it would not be her father who would come up to her. Perhaps, however loud she called, no one would come up.

She sprang out of bed and tugged at the window shutter. It held at first, then opened suddenly. She stared out of the dark room into a clear blue twilight, lit by one star, but as she stood there, star after star came out; there was a new one wherever she looked. A wakened bird called out and was still again. The waiting, watching night crept on, to what fulfilment?

There came at last a definite sound below, a door opened and a man went out of the house. Nan saw Mr. Hambridge walking with slow, uneven steps towards

the drive. From her window she could only just see the tall beech-trees at the side, but she had pushed it open, and now heard the sound of footsteps change from the muffled thud they made on the grass to a rougher and harder quality. Clippety clop, clip clop, heavily, unevenly, they clumped away down the drive until, just as they were beginning to get faint, they suddenly ceased. The steps had stood still at the end of the drive.

At the end of the drive was the ramshackle cottage, the hens, the oddly bedizened figure that had stood in the doorway, lifting her ringed hand to her breast.

In the light of this sudden memory, of Nurse's dark hints and her mother's far more emphatic warnings, disregarded because she had not understood them, Nan saw that scene far more vividly than her actual sight had done. For ever now the woman would stand there, lumpish and white in the semi-darkness of her cottage, a passive enemy, too secure to hide or fight.

So that was what Nurse had meant by a white jelly, yes, and the creature would certainly shake if she ever had to run. She would like to drive her off the estate with a corn-pike as Nurse had driven Captain Moreton, but she did not want actually to prod her, the pike would go in too far. No, she would just make her run, shaking and panting and jolting up and down, gasping and snorting, wobbling from side to side, her heavy feet going flumpety flump, flimp flump, to the same

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tune as Mr. Hambridge's as he turned his back on his house and trudged away, down, down, down the drive and then stopped.

Mr. Hambridge had gone to her, had meant all along to go to her, and that was why he had insisted on bringing his bride back to Cricketts on her wedding day instead of staying the night at home. She would never go home again, none of them there should know. Alice would cry for her and think of her as 'Poor Nan.' Moll would not cry, she would laugh if she ever knew that Nan's only embrace on her wedding day had been from the dairy boy. At that Nan began to laugh herself, at first from ridicule, and then from relief, and then from a sudden wild hopefulness.

That heavy and inert figure at the supper table was not then the man for her. If he did not trouble about her she would not trouble about him. She was free to love someone else, she did not know whom, but there was the whole world before her, now fading from her sight in the growing darkness. She stretched out her arms to it, she raised herself on tiptoe, she was trembling with happiness, with expectation.

*Part* II





## PART II

ON Nan's departure from the table, Mr. Hambridge's boisterous humour revived. Shifting his wide leather chair sideways, he leaned confidentially across its arm, and demanded of his chaplain, 'What d'you think of that? Seventeen and with no more sense than a brat of seven. Chatters like an ape. And a slut if ever there was one. She's got her eye on you, my Puritan saint. Not Benjamin but Joseph is your true name, hey? Don't take after your father do you?'

Mr. Cork was the bastard son of a footman and a lady of quality, a misfortune that Mr. Hambridge had joked about too frequently to make him wince now. He was a scholar and a schemer, but as a scholar was the sounder of the two. He had remained a Puritan too long, and was caught by the tide when it turned at the Restoration. He had been in prison, he might have starved, he might even have hanged, but instead he had been able to retire from public life as a country parson, 'for a while' as he had been telling himself now for some years. His only duties as chaplain at Cricketts Manor were to take a hand at cards occasionally with his patron, and listen to him while he drank. These activities were insufficient to his am-

bitious energy. He consoled his leisure with a hidden printing press in Cambridge, which necessitated long absences from Cricketts, and alleviated his presence there with the occasional visit of a pedlar. That secret as well as public messenger of the day was often engaged in business more important than that of mere packman, and might bring privately printed books or news for him alone. In the liberty of the press he found an object worthy of his powers; amid all his disillusion he could still believe with his greatest leader that he would 'as soon kill a man as kill a good book.'

At this moment, Mr. Cork would indeed have said 'sooner.' He was waiting for Mr. Hambridge to take the opportunity afforded by his mention of his bride to compare the physical qualities of various types of women. His interest Mr. Cork believed to be the result of ignorance. Lady Ingleby had been right in attributing bashfulness to her son-in-law; his modesty was so great that it would never permit him to aspire to any woman of higher rank than a village drab. His marriage was an accident, as he had explained to his chaplain every evening since he himself had been told of it. He did so again to-night and with a greater bitterness now that he was confronted with the actual presence of a wife in the house.

'Trapped into it,' he confided in the hoarse whisper of a stage conspirator, 'trapped by the mother bitch.

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Badger she is, got a mouth like a badger, and a nose like an eagle. A pox on all women I say.'

The inconsistency of this prayer on the lips of a man who was only waiting to finish his bottle before he sought his wench, struck Mr. Cork as a subject worthy of the ingenious Dr. Donne.

Oh do not die, for I shall hate  
All women so when thou art gone,  
That thee I shall not celebrate  
When I remember thou wast one.

His lips silently shaped the words; rugged and old-fashioned as he knew them to be, they roused him to pride in mankind and contempt for the specimen of it that confronted him. 'Shall a poet measure the appetite of a baboon?' he asked himself. Such a thought held promise that perhaps he too might be a poet. The late Protector's secretary had been out of work since the Restoration, and had dignified his leisure with long poems in blank verse of no interest nor value to the public, but they had served to amuse himself and furnish endless employment to the daughters to whom he dictated them. To have daughters and secretaries combined, appealed to Mr. Cork as the perfect consummation of human ties, until he remembered to have heard that Mr. Milton's three daughters were stupid and unwilling and that his three wives had also been unsatisfactory. The essential solitude of all men

seemed to him at this moment a state so pitiful that he attempted an approach to sympathy with his patron.

'Surely,' he said, 'you do not wish to die without the common heritage of mankind, an heir to your body and estate?'

He had to repeat his question, and Mr. Hambridge then made it clear that he did not wish to die at all, but if, or when, he should have to, it would make no difference to him what he left behind him. His forehead wrinkled like a crumpled red handkerchief, his body heaved backwards and then forwards, with a mighty effort he brought forth his conception of paternity. 'My father beat me, but I paid him back in his lifetime and with good interest too. I've no need of a whelp of my own to kick.'

'And the retribution you inflicted on your father might in its turn be visited on you. I admire, sir, the justice and prudence of your sentiments.'

'Bah,' answered the patron. He hated it when the chaplain talked like a fine gentleman. In his hazy opinion they had always been the best of friends, but now a woman had come into the house, she was sure to spoil it all. People talked about weak women. He had thought he was a cunning dog when he wanted Tumbleton Park to extend his deer park, he had remembered that its owner was a widow with an enormous family, who had been impoverished by the Common-

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wealth and left unrecompensed by the Restoration; he had gone chuckling to drive his bargain. Well, he had had a pup sold him that time. He had not got Tumbleton near as cheap as he had hoped, not even with one of its owner's daughters thrown in, a condition that the Dowager Lady Ingleby had persisted in pretending to be to his advantage as much as he knew it to be to hers.

How it had happened he did not know, as again and again he had told Mr. Cork, but he had found himself thankful to quit the interview at any cost, and so greatly was his confidence shaken that he could congratulate himself on departure that she had made no trouble over the matter of Bess Tiddle at the Lodge, but reserved it all for her questioning of the settlements. Here indeed no tigress could have shown more tenderness for her cubs.

It happened that in the village that morning Mr. Cork had encountered a puppy with a hurt paw. It had yelped when he touched it, but gambolled round his feet in an absurd, trustful, helpless fashion, it had nibbled the bows on his shoes, rolled against his ankles, sat up suddenly and yawned as though it laughed in his face. He had picked it up and caressed it with an unreasoning tenderness which he believed to be alien to the rest of his nature and therefore despised. He discovered that some boys had amused themselves by throwing stones at it, and his rage had so swelled and

heated his veins, causing his face to burn and his hands to twitch with the longing to inflict torment on the tormentors, that he himself had been more frightened than the children at whom he had stormed. His noble rage had encouraged, once it had ceased to shake and trouble him; he had walked home repeating to himself a bitter passage from Juvenal.

Now he thought of the merry and friendless little creature that had sat at supper with them, and once again his involuntary pity stood excused, for it was mingled with disgust at his patron, at Bess Tiddle and the Dowager Lady Ingleby, and he could justifiably encourage anything that ministered to his contempt for humanity. A hog, a slug, a harpy, was it for such as these that Christ died? If so, how could any man put faith in a fool for a God?

The room was stuffy and smelt of food, affecting his weak digestion with a sense of nausea.

'I have found shelter in a sty, and am held fortunate to have found it,' he said aloud in a gentle voice, for it had long been his opinion that at this stage of the evening Mr. Hambridge would distinguish no words that were said to him unless the tone were sufficiently marked to carry some of the sense with it. To-night he was feeling reckless enough to try, and was justified, for his patron showed no offence but merely nodded his head and murmured vague approval. Mr. Cork

laughed, and caught sight of his grimace in the flat pewter dish that stood upright against the wall, the only piece of plate that was kept well polished, because it was the first prize Mr. Hambridge had ever won at a fair.

The mute reflection of his own ill will exasperated Mr. Cork yet further. All his life he had postured and played a part which no one but himself had even observed. So dull and aching was this perpetual solitude that he could have welcomed any intrusion into it, even that of a body of horse for his arrest.

Mr. Hambridge rose and with a swaggering gesture raised his bumper to a precarious height. Drunken tears stood in his eyes at the departure of his freedom. So long had they two sat together and made merry and now a woman would sit with them.

‘Here,’ he said, ‘is a health to all jolly roaring boys like ourselves.’

His chaplain also rose and raised his glass, he also drank. But in no way were Mr. Hambridge’s apprehensions lightened by any sense of good fellowship. A damned, sour, Protestant martyr sort of face loomed up before him, he would throw his wine in it as soon as drink it. But it was his pride that drink did not usually make him quarrelsome. He swallowed his wine and his resentment together, then moved heavily towards the door, out through the hall into the cool



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evening air, which struck so suddenly on his clogged senses that he became aware of the enormous silence encompassing him.

His recent dissatisfaction with his chaplain passed into a shivering pity for himself. Women had attacked and trapped him, his best friend had left him in the lurch. He trudged down the drive in a condition that fast became maudlin. On Bess's bosom he sobbed a little and reiterated that all women except village whores should be drowned. Her large white face did not move. The air in her room was close and thick. A comfortable heaviness settled on him, his head fell against an arm like a pillow, once again he was sunk in sloth and indifference, the dearest ties he had known since as a youth he had declared his passion to a fine lady who had laughed at him for a hobbledehoy.

Bess looked over his head at the new ring he had given her on his wedding morning.

Mr. Cork had left the empty glasses, the spilt wine and smell of food, he no longer heard his patron's boots scrunching on the drive. He was walking in the walled garden in the front of the house, his head bent, his eyes fixed on the square black bows of his square black shoes, going up and down, up and down, on the dim and shining surface of the lawn.

The quiet of the night intruded into his thoughts,

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the damp on his feet caused him at last to observe the dew on the grass. He looked up and saw the outline of the house and its many chimneys black against the sky. There were lights in one or two of the lower windows; at an upper one he saw something white which he took at first to be a blurred reflection of moonlight until he remembered that there was no moon; and as he looked, it disappeared. The window he now knew to be that of the wedding chamber; the white thing he had seen at it must have been the figure of the waiting bride. A sudden rage possessed him, with men for insensate brutes, with women for patient, pitiful clods, with himself for he did not know what, but he struck his forehead as it occurred to him that he was forty and had never been in love, that perhaps in more than politics he had remained a Puritan too long.

Like the silly sluts of the household, all he had to look forward to was the visit of the next pedlar. He saw his life as brief and insignificant, his fruitless schemes to win advancement, power, any manner of notice, as a tedious beguiling of the time. Only death was certain. What then was life, if this was all? He longed to burst through the petty circumscriptions of his self-interest, to lose his anxious and fastidious pride, his whole self, in some large and generous nature.

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Without again thinking of the wakeful creature flitting behind the windows of the wedding chamber, he went to his room at the end of the long gallery, he lit the candles and read till late into the night. This was his form of drunkenness, which enabled him to enter the souls of heroes and philosophers. He could reason with Socrates and travel the world with Herodotus; in perusing a poem of Ovid's he could believe himself a poet and a lover, had he ever encountered a female worthy of his regard.

These fancies had sustained him in his youth through anxiety and disappointment, but the long dullness of his present life had clouded his spirit, and he read from habit rather than enthusiasm, returning to his books night after night like a patient plodding lover who dares not forsake his mistress, for lack of another. He might yawn and his eyes ache, but if he closed his book the heavy hours would still stretch between him and the dawn.

At length his candle flame looked pale, and his chamber grey and unsubstantial as if made out of a cloud. The wedding night was over. He opened his window and saw the familiar outlines of tree and barn divorced from the solid earth, grey shapes that floated on a mist. A scrunching sound heralded the return of his patron.

Mr. Hambridge stood on the threshold, looked

round him and behind him and then upwards, kicked the mud from his boots with unaccustomed care, wiped his face two or three times, and then with great deliberation entered his house. He went into the dark hall, stubbed his toe against the chest and swore, but patiently and under his breath, made his way to the stairs and there paused with foot upraised over a shapeless object which he took to be a mess left by one of the dogs. He was addressing it as such with objurgations when the thing hopped into a shaft of light from between the shutters and there revealed itself as a large toad, which turned and looked at him, opening and shutting its mouth as if in silent protest against the terms applied to it.

Mr. Hambridge had clutched at the broad wooden rail of the banisters in his alarm at the surprising movement of a piece of inanimate matter, nor was it now much lessened, since a toad that awaited his homecoming at such a moment might well be an emissary from old Goody Crickle. One of her eyes was growing red and he had noticed it leering at him in an unpleasant fashion. When next he administered justice on the bench, he would have her ducked, and see if she did not bob up to the surface of the pond as lightly as if she rode in one of her accursed egg-shells. He strode after her messenger to stamp on it, but it leaped away, and if he pursued it in the darkness there was no

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knowing but what it might spring upon his neck and there fasten unnaturally long and clammy claws about his throat till he was strangled. In any case he had received no good omen for a newly married man.

He went up the stairs and down the passage to the bridal chamber where he again paused to mop his face, to wish that an angel would come down from heaven to rescue him, to wish he were dead. Nobody would miss him, Bess had asked him for more money, a witch had sent her familiar to him, his bride was waiting for him. With a deep sigh he pushed open the door.

He stood in the doorway and his astonished gaze rolled round the room, over the bed, out at the window. The shutters stood wide, the bed-curtains were drawn back, the room was light, the bed empty, the window open. Outside a bird was singing, so that he said to himself, 'The bird has flown.' Astonishment gave way to relief, but that in its turn changed to alarm. Had the girl run back to her mother? A cold sweat broke out on his forehead at the thought of again being faced by that badger-like mouth, and this time in anger. He must ask the maids, but they were none of them up, the sluts, still hogging it in bed though it was now broad daylight. There was no order in his house, everybody robbed him, taking his money for nothing. He had married a wife but she would not look after it, she ran away almost before she had come, that was

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what came of marrying a woman, they were all alike, they got what they could out of you and left you in the lurch.

He bawled to the servants. One or two were stirring. A maid had seen Mrs. Anne run out of the back part of the house not ten minutes ago. She had nothing with her, she did not look as though she were running away, so the maid assured her master, tittering behind her hand until he caught her a box on the ear.

Nan had not run away. She had gone to gather mushrooms, but returned instead with a cluster of toadstools, some scarlet, some yellow, some of a dull purple and shaped like hoods. These she placed on the flat pewter dish in the oak room and said to the girl Keziah who was sweeping the room, 'Here's a fine dish of mushrooms.'

Keziah leaned back against her broom so that it looked like a long tail. Her dress was slatternly, her face freckled and kind, her hair a rich copper colour, but she would have been better looking without it, for the other maids had so teased and snubbed her on its account, telling her to hang herself on a Judas tree, that she was persuaded she was a fright and that young Jim, the tallest of the stable boys, would never look at her.

She said, 'Lord, Mistress, but those are all toadstools.'

'Then leave them there for the toads to sit on.'

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What a sauce-box. She would stand up to the master. Keziah laughed admiringly, then, pointing at Nan's new clogs, her giggles grew hysterical, for one was fastened with a plait of hay. Nan had lost one of her red leather thongs as she was climbing a haystack, and sitting on its dewy summit had begun to cry, until she remembered that she was no longer at home and that even Nurse could not scold her overmuch now she was married. At that she clapped her hands and laughed instead, she looked round on the strange world that the rising mist uncurtained before her eyes, here a bright pool and there a mound sprinkled with daisies, and thought it all new made for her delight. In the distance rose the hill that she had seen from the window last night, but a ray of white sunlight transformed the cabbage field that crowned it to a steel-blue peak, so that it appeared encased in armour like a wizard's fortress.

The larks sang invisible, high in the white air. The grass was covered with dew and gossamer and showed itself only in a straggling path of green footprints, so small and sharply pointed, so little resembling the shape of the human foot, that they looked as though some goblin must have passed that way. They came up to the haystack where Nan sat perched, and she looked down on them and perceived a special glory in the world that could so clearly take the imprint of her new clogs.

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After that first evening, she forgot that she was a neglected wife, except when Mr. Hambridge reminded her by a marital visit inspired by a sense of duty and policy, and encountered a wild cat. She had no attraction for him, she was too small and meagre; he could crush her easily in his grasp, but lust was not sufficiently strong in him for that to please him, nor was he so active as to enjoy resistance. It hurt his feelings to be repulsed, the old wound to his youthful sensitiveness was then reopened, and he saw himself again as a lumpish clod that no woman could ever regard except as an object of ridicule.

‘God knows,’ said he, ‘I’m willing enough to let you alone but that I thought to please your mother.’

‘That is impossible,’ said Nan, ‘and she is not here so we can do as we like.’

Her elfin grin reminded him uneasily of an old-fashioned play, the only one he had seen, in which the Queen of the Fairies caressed and cajoled an ungainly peasant with the head of an ass. His sense of the latent power and mercilessness of women was increased by this tiny creature he had inadvertently married. With Bess he at least could be sure of what she was thinking, since she was not thinking at all.

After that the husband continued to be out all night while the wife was out all day. Nurse might shake her head and hand her the keys again and again, but Nan



lost them in so many odd places, in a bucket, in a horse-trough, in Mr. Hambridge's fishing-basket, in Mr. Cork's high-crowned clerical hat, that the other servants begged Nurse to give up the attempt to make her mistress perform her duties. Nor did her husband demand it. Instinct bade him let sleeping dogs and particularly bitches lie. The dish of toadstools remained on the sideboard as evidence of her only order to the household.

Protected by the presence of another male, Mr. Hambridge could assert his manhood, swagger with the best of them and tell his stories with an added zest now that they were heard by someone for the first instead of the fiftieth time; he could display his indifference to his wife by throwing her at another man's head. The glummer Mr. Cork looked, the more Nan laughed and helped to provoke him. Mr. Hambridge egged her on to twit the chaplain, roared with laughter at her sallies and Mr. Cork's sarcastic responses, declared it was as fine as a play to listen to them.

A defiant turbulence reigned at the supper table between the half-drunken husband and the increasingly reckless wife, watched always by the chaplain. She would rather he scolded than so look at her. She did her best to make him. She spoke slightly of her mother, having divined that his own opinion of Lady Ingleby and her treatment of her daughter

did not prevent his counting this as a heavy mark against her.

‘But you hate your mother,’ she said, ‘for all that you never say so.’ She tossed back her hair which had fallen over her face like a gipsy’s; her eyes were bright with excitement. Her freedom had gone to her head more than Mr. Hambridge’s wine to his. No longer was she herded with the children, made to finish the fat and gristle, forbidden to speak. She could eat, drink, and answer back what she liked and there was no one to reprove her, for she did not care what Mr. Squaretoes thought of her, he was only the chaplain for all that he gave himself such airs and seemed grander than any of them. Her husband was cheering her on as though she were a terrier.

‘At him, girl, at him! Bait the Puritan bear,’ he roared across his tankard. ‘Look to yourself my Benjamin Joseph. She’ll bring you to her feet yet. The ugly ones are the most determined, hey Joseph?’

That was bad, she did not like to be called ugly even by her husband. Mr. Cork would not trouble to answer him or herself. She did not care. If no one would speak she could sing as her father had used to do. Out came one of his deep-mouthed songs in a childish treble, accompanied by Mr. Hambridge a note late, for he could not remember the words and had not yet got the hang of the tune.

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Let us drink and be merry, dance, joke and rejoice,  
With claret and sherry, theorbo and voice!  
The changeable world to our joy is unjust,  
All treasure's uncertain  
Then down with your dust!  
In frolics dispose your pounds, shillings and pence,  
For we shall be nothing a hundred years hence.

A changeable world. A King's head on the block.  
A brewer on the throne. A beggar come home to be  
King. Anything might happen any minute. One foot  
up and one foot down and she would be in London  
yet with the world at her feet.

Mr. Hambridge called 'Brava' for another verse.  
Mr. Cork had after all begun to speak, in a low tone  
and looking hard at her.

'I never knew,' he said, 'the mother whom, as you  
say, I hated for bearing me as a footman's bastard.  
But I know that the virtues admirable in a female are  
those of filial piety, dignity in manner, decorum in  
conduct, discretion in speech. I am therefore in no  
danger of admiration of my patron's wife, however my  
patron's zest for sport may thrust me to it.'

'What's that? Say it again. He's pinked you, has he?  
Give him it back, girl, show fight now. Stand up to the  
footman's bastard, said it himself, didn't he?'

But Nan would neither stand nor look up, the tears  
had come smarting into her eyes and she would not  
show them. She had thought she was a woman with

the world before her, and she had found she was nothing but a rude girl. She had wanted to make Mr. Cork angry, but not in this cold, still way. Nor had he been only angry. She had hurt as well as insulted him.

'I don't care for your being a footman's bastard,' she said at last in a choked voice, but if she did not speak, she would sob outright. 'I never meant to remind you of it. And if I did, it cannot matter to you what I do or say.'

A sudden snort proceeded from Mr. Hambridge. His eyes were shut and his expression was one of lofty oblivion. Her voice died as she looked at him, she forgot Mr. Cork and her halting apology to him, her tearful, twisted face grew calm in its intent observation. This creature thought her witty where Mr. Cork found her odious; this then was her fit companion and she must expect no better. Leave her own level and she would be despised, as she in her arrogant folly had despised her husband. The thoughts that sped across her mind threw their shadows on her face.

As Mr. Cork watched her, he saw in his mind the lawn where he had paced that evening, and across its surface the swift and silent passage of curved shadows, until at last he had looked up to see a flight of swallows. He did not know why he remembered this, nor what had brought the unexpected lightening to his heart. Hope rose within him, he thought it was because the

wisdom he had acquired through bitter experience might yet be of some service to another. He told himself that Mrs. Anne's education had been at least as much at fault as her nature, that it would be a pity if her thoughtless folly brought her to disaster. And he noticed for the first time, with a pleasure that passed into annoyance since he had no mind to confuse it with his disinterested desire to be of service, that there was a charm for him in her small, bent head, and the turn of her neck, brown as it was, in this rare pensive curve.

He leaned across the table and said in an odd, rather harsh voice, 'I did not mean to make you sad.'

She looked up at him, and her husband, who just now had been the only company she could hope for in life, ceased to exist. She put out her hand to him across the table and said, 'Nor I you.'

Mr. Cork smiled. 'Then let us make a bargain of it,' he said, and took her hand, 'that neither of us shall make the other sad.'

The words echoed in his mind. It was perhaps the loneliness of his present life after the crowded business of his intrigues that made a simple sentence ring like a memory or else an omen, as though to all eternity they would sit holding hands across a table in front of a sleeping sot, and promise not to make the other sad.

The spell was broken. They sat back in their chairs, neither knowing who had moved first; the husband

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sat up and said, 'What's that? I'm not asleep. I hear every word you say when you don't mumble.'

'I was asking your permission,' said Mr. Cork, 'to undertake Mrs. Anne's studies, since fortune deprived her family of tutors too early for her to benefit by them.'

Mr. Hambridge rolled an eye on him and closed it. 'Undertake her then,' he approved. 'Teach her what you like, since I've no mind to.'

'No *mind* indeed!' cried Nan, flaring up at the notion that Mr. Hambridge could teach her anything. But Mr. Cork's face had shut down again in reproof or warning, and she would not again offend him.

With a cunning that should have served him better in his career, Mr. Cork showed Nan a new play from London which the King and all the Court had been to see. All the actors' and actresses' names were printed on the front page. When her father had gone to plays there were no actresses, only boys dressed up as women. People had been strangely foolish and old-fashioned in those days. Now perhaps she too might one day see her name on that list, might dance and make fine speeches before the King. She ceased to object that she could write her own name if need be, and spell out most words if written in clear capitals and not too long and hard. She caught the play-book to her as if it were a living creature, and said 'Yes I *will* read.'

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After that she learned with surprising speed when she gave her attention to it. But more often she employed all her efforts to induce Mr. Cork to tell her of the world. In her awed attention to him, spiced though it often was with irrelevant laughter and peppered with pert answers, he could catch a reflection of himself as a great man.

She heard that the subtle and devilish Papists had undoubtedly caused the Great Fire, that a true and worthy divine such as Mr. Bunyan was imprisoned for refusing to take the Communion on his knees in his own church, while the impious Parker was made Bishop of Oxford though he had openly declared that the best body of Divinity was that which would help a man keep a coach and six horses. These echoes of rumours and complaints, muttered under the heavy wigs that leaned together in taverns and the new coffee-houses, criticisms of the laws and demands for the freedom of the Press, were of less importance to her than the fashionable new Eastern drink that had accompanied them in the fashionable new dishes of porcelain. To see plays, to drink coffee, to collect china, only these visible signs of an advancing civilization could impress Nan.

She wanted stories of the King, undeterred by Mr. Cork's criticism that that was all a King was good for, to provide a common ground of gossip through the

nation. In the remotest corners of the countryside yokels could drink and shout themselves hoarse because King Charles had won a race at Newmarket on his topping horse Blue Cap. Old women such as Nan's nurse loved to tell how the Queen had gone masquerading to a fair and ridden home in a fright. Mr. Cork only gossiped about the Royal Family to political purpose. King Charles's youngest sister who died, was it true that her jealous husband had poisoned her? that she, the leader of fashion in Europe, had as a baby been smuggled out of England in a bundle of rags? Mr. Cork replied that she had been a Papist married to the French King's brother, and that King Charles's intense affection for his sister had therefore been of more danger to the nation than his lusts. The State was ruled by women, the men had grown slack and effeminate.

The very evening that the Dutch sailed up the Medway and burnt the English ships in their own country, the King was fooling with his mistresses and worthless courtiers, all of them chasing a moth like mad.

'A moth, Mr. Cork?'

'Ay a poor moth. An acquaintance of mine had it on good authority from one Mr. Pepys, Secretary to the Naval Board, a sound sober man who has no patience with folly and vice. They made a scapegoat of Pett the shipbuilder who was no more to blame than I was.'



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She sat entranced by the image of that gorgeous company racketing after a moth, just like herself and the children at home, while Mr. Cork in indignant tones read her the following remarkable passage:

Who the Dutch fleet with storms disabled met?  
And, rifling prizes, them neglected? *Pett.*  
Who with false news prevented the Gazette?  
The fleet divided? Writ for Rupert? *Pett.*  
Who all our seamen cheated of their debt,  
And all our prizes who did swallow? *Pett.*  
Who did advise no navy out to set?  
And who the forts left unprepared? *Pett.*  
Who to supply with powder did forget  
Languard, Sheerness, Gravesend, and Upnor? *Pett.*  
Who all our ships exposed in Chatham net?  
Who should it be but the fanatic Pett?

The pewter dish, now divested of the toadstools that had remained on it till they shrivelled, stood upright once more on the trestle table against the wall. On its smooth surface there shone the reflections of the round bottles of gin and brandy; and in these Nan could see herself reflected, but upside down. She interrupted the satire to inquire into the phenomenon, but for all his learning, Mr. Cork could not explain it.

She snatched up one of the bottles and ran with it to the window. In its dark globed shape, she saw a little black dot of a man walking on his head along the straggling path over the hill. 'It's a topsy-turvy world

now,' her father used to say. 'All turned upside down.' She had never thought to look at it upside down in a brandy bottle with him, and now she could only do so with Mr. Cork. He should not have died. She beat her fist against the small leaded panes, snatched at the latch, and in passionate protest against his death, flung open the window. The wind blew damp and keen on her face; the little man was still going up over the hill, for one moment he made a spike on the top, and then disappeared. He was perhaps going to London.

She poured the brandy on the grass and held up the bottle to him. 'Look! Now it is empty and everything is right side up. But liquid does not turn a thing upside down. Why is it, Mr. Cork?'

He could discover no interest in a problem which struck her as of more importance than the rules of grammar. He did not agree that the Royal Society should be informed so that they might study it in their scientific investigations. Now it was she who was dissatisfied with her tutor's intelligence, since a scholar should at least wish to know why a full bottle showed them standing on their heads.

But a more immediate problem engaged them and that was Mr. Hambridge's, who had entered the room and wished to know why the brandy bottle was empty.

Sunlight and shadow moved across the pewter dish.

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The beech-trees tossed and shouted in the wind, mocking Mr. Cork's voice as it read of a perfect garden where the first man and woman, naked but prim, entertained an angel to a dinner of cold fruit laid on a table out of doors, and listened to his instructive lecture with a patience Nan could not emulate.

As soon as he stopped, she would say, 'Rory's new litter is in the big barn and three of the puppies are spotted. Will you come now and see them?'

But she never said it, for old Giles put a face like a mop round the door and said in his yammering voice which could never finish his words because he could never shut his mouth properly, 'If you please, Mr. Cork sir, the pedlar's here in the courtyard. And young mistress too, the maids said I was to tell,' he added, opening his mouth again wider than ever and snapping it up and down like a trap among all the hairy tufts on his cheeks and chin.

Down went Adam and Eve and the angel on the table. Even Nan did not spring up more quickly than Mr. Cork.

The pedlar had brought shoe-latchets of green and of chrome leather but none of red to match the missing thong on her clogs. No pedlar ever had just what one wanted, and she would not change the colour since she had chosen red. She would have to go shod in parti-colour like a Fool at the Fair, and Keziah hooted

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like a hysterical owl at the notion, laying a broad hand on her young mistress's shoulder while the other pointed out all the treasures she might get for the house. All the maids clustered and swirled round her, beseeching her to buy so that they might have the pleasure of seeing the purchases made. The pedlar had pepper and cloves and mops and feather brooms, he had pins with coloured heads and handkerchiefs and ribbons, and the new oblong brass door-knobs which all the gentry were using in London instead of the old-fashioned latches. He had a book of theology for Mr. Cork which he had been ordered to bring from Cambridge.

Mr. Cork did not leave when he had bought it but lingered on the outskirts of the group. Nan saw that he was watching her nonsense with Keziah and exaggerated it. She told Keziah she would get her a new broom, for hers must be worn out by the way she sat against it as though she were accustomed to ride on it.

'A witch! a witch!' cried the other girls. 'They say red hair for a witch.'

Keziah went scarlet and flung up her hands to scratch, no one knew whose face, for Nan's arm was round her in that instant. 'She is not a witch. I never meant it. You are all jealous of her hair because it is the same colour as the Good Queen's. Remember that, Keziah, your hair is as good as Queen Bess's ever was,

and next time you go to the fair you shall have a crimson petticoat and a white waistcoat.' She had a brief vision as she spoke of streets filled with cheering crowds, of extraordinary gaiety, but it could not recall to her why she had thought of Keziah's gala dress as a white waistcoat and a crimson petticoat.

She had forgotten Mr. Cork but now she saw him smile. He was continually placing her in some mental category of his own according to some such process as item: a generous impulse, or item; a foolish answer. Of this she was sometimes vaguely and rather uncomfortably aware, although of the nature of the category she often had no further evidence than a protracted 'H'm.' But even his disapproval could flatter one who had never before been considered, weighed, and questioned as to what manner of person she was. She, as well as Keziah, held her head a little higher than when she had first come out.

Now that all the purchases had been made, the pedlar produced a stale copy of the *Intelligencer* and read bits to the company in a thin well-educated voice, for he had been an usher before he had fallen on evil days. His paper was a poor substitute for a news-letter, for it had no tales of murder and witchcraft, only long complaints of some people who still dared to print books without first showing them to Sir Robert L'Estrange to see if they were fit and proper to be printed or not.

The maids drifted away, and at the third mention of the licence of the Press, Nan followed them, for Mr. Cork had ceased to take any interest in her, he had even asked her sarcastically what pleasure or understanding she could find in such reading. That was not fair, since he had already told her of that odious Sir Roger, and so she should be able to understand; and she would have liked to ask why seditious printing should be called 'the feminine part of revolt.'

Dawdling and lingering, she looked back as she was turning at the end of the wall, and saw the pedlar put a black oblong box into Mr. Cork's hands. Why had not the pedlar displayed it or Mr. Cork asked for it before, when he bought the book? Was there a secret in the box such as her sister Alice kept? Everyone had a secret in a box except herself.

Mr. Cork had seen her looking. He strode across the yard to her. 'What do you do there?' he asked in a hard voice.

It was useless to lie. 'I was wondering what was in that box,' said Nan.

'Prying and spying,' he stormed, 'you are the kind that would do your truest friends a mischief.' Then his face, which had been twisted in wrath, changed oddly as though he were deliberately smoothing it out. He watched her darkly as he stood between her and the pedlar and said, 'There is nothing in the box that all

the world might not see. Come and satisfy your idle curiosity for yourself.'

He walked back to the pedlar. Nan followed him for a few steps and then in her silent cloth slippers she turned and went into the house. He moved to go after her, then he thought, no, he had taught her to have some little awe of him, and he would lessen it if he ran after her to make up their quarrel like a couple of children. She would not long stay in the house in a huff when there was a pedlar and a secret box outside. He would await her without seeming to do so and buy her some trifle that would appease her without need of words.

He did so, and the pedlar removed the innocent theological work he had hastily placed in the box while Mr. Cork spoke to Nan, and substituted the original pamphlets, of which he besought him to have the greatest care. His recent shock had exhausted Mr. Cork.

'Suspicion, fear, anger,' he complained. 'What a price we pay for thinking what we would!' If thought went free, life might be happy, but he did not say this last aloud for the pedlar was a blunt business man, concerned more with the trade of illicit printing than with its possible benefits to mankind.

'Slit noses and cropped ears, that's the price Sir Roger would charge,' he said. Only forty years ago

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the pedlar's grandfather had paid with both for the pleasure of calling a bishop 'an anti-Christian mushroom.'

But the world changed fast now. The Star Chamber was out of date. Tolerance was the fashion, or would be if the King could make it so. His idea of concord was when "His nonsense suits their nonsense." He held that the restrictions did more harm than good and that everyone might as well be left to print what he would. The King's conformity with the stern regicide, Milton, impressed Mr. Cork for a moment with the similarities of men rather than their differences.

All his life he himself had worked and hoped and suffered alone. He wondered if, in His Majesty's careless phrase, his nonsense could ever suit anyone else's nonsense.

He watched the doorway in the tail of his eye, a hundred times he thought he saw Mrs. Anne in its shadow, her neck bent in that rare pensive curve that had once before delighted him. So strongly did his fancy paint her that it seemed her image would always haunt that place, and others as well as himself would see her standing there, looking out into the yard, awaiting his signal.

But it was nothing but a shadow, she was not there, she did not come out. He had meant to be kind to her and he had only wearied and then hurt her, he was not



fit to deal with women, he had not the necessary arts and graces. The pedlar talked of that glass of fashion and professor of vice, the Duke of Buckingham, turned Nonconformist leader in consequence of a quarrel with Barbara Palmer, now Duchess of Cleveland; of the possible effects of his discontent and determination to form a party in the country. Mr. Cork only thought of the Duke of Buckingham's thousand successful amours, of the coats and cravats that he wore but once and then gave away to his valet, of the insolent mimicry, the licentious buffoonery, the mad caprices that passed for wit and spirit among those who could not appreciate true worth. The rascal could even write verse. Or thought he could. Or—stay, yes that was more like it—others thought he could. Of course it was some poor starving poet who wrote His Grace's plays for him. He wondered he had not known it before.

The Duke of Buckingham had added another to his diverse functions; he had made Mr. Cork see Nan as a woman rather than as a child whose neglected education it was his duty to try to improve. Had he seen her so before, he would not have tried, for in his own way he was as averse from women as Mr. Hambridge; either he had found them chattering and vain or else of dull intelligence, and in all cases not to be trusted. Mrs. Anne's pert fancy could distract his thoughts, her interest, volatile as it was, could flatter

him lightly, but he would not have troubled with her had not his first image of her been confused with that of a small and helpless creature to whom the world was unkind. Now the image had shifted a little.

The pedlar left with the opinion that Mr. Cork's long and ignoble sojourn as a country chaplain had dulled his wits too far to make him considerable in any plans for the future.

Mr. Cork hurried back to the oak room and found it empty.

The window was narrow, but she was as agile as a monkey. She could have squeezed through it and jumped to the ground. She was off on her wanderings again, this time perhaps in a fit of the sulks, but that would not last long with her. She would soon be back.

Nan ran over the common; the wind made a sail of her skirts and blew her along like a boat over the rippling sea of coarse grass where the pools and rivulets lay in patches and snake-like streaks of silver. She did not know for how many hours she travelled thus; the wind was behind her, the world before her, she might come to the edge of it and look over, had she not been told that the world was round, but that she could never believe.

She came at last to a little hill, and on the other side the country was all quite different, a fine wooded

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park lay below, and the chimneys of a great house. She found her way to a wall which she managed to climb, and dropped down from it on to a lawn where heavy yew-trees stood all round like thunderclouds. The afternoon had clouded over and the sky showed signs of storm. She stood there half afraid in the silence. A few pale leaves scampered over the grass, and then, following them in a dancing flight, some faint notes of music. Nan stepped softly through the yew-trees on to a gravelled terrace and started back, for there were people standing, unnaturally still. Then she saw that they were only stone griffins, and that she was close up to a house which was so big that it must be a palace.

She could see nobody and thought that if she went into the kitchens she would find the servants fast asleep with cobwebs hanging from their noses, or else find nobody at all and that silent pairs of hands would bring her food and drink and play the music which had died on her approach. But at that instant it again came tripping out of the house. She stood on a flower-pot and looked in through the nearest window.

The small, diamond-leaded panes of blown glass made the scene inside dim, but the reflection of fire-light lay here and there on surfaces of satin, of polished wood, of glass and silver. She noticed these pools and rivulets of colour, these points as bright as diamonds,

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before they formed into a pattern, as a kaleidoscope does when it is shaken, and saw that she was looking into a large room where many people were sitting or standing, but so still that she had reversed her mistake with the stone griffins on the terrace and taken them for gorgeous but inanimate objects such as their surrounding furniture. The sound of music was all that moved in the room; the musicians were invisible.

But now, in a picture, though luminously clear, she saw a group of three persons who played a violin, a flute, and the virginals. They moved as in life; the man who played the violin shook back the long curls of his periwig out of the way of his bow, the lady's bent fingers stepped up and down on the notes of the virginals, the youth swayed to his flute. And all this took place within a frame of a bright green pattern, while close to it a boy with a spaniel in his arms stood gravely listening, so still, his white and pink dress so pinched in and puffed out, so beribboned and rosetted that his figure bore but little resemblance to that of life.

The music died; a spell was lifted from the scene; all those splendid figures stirred, they rose or moved their heads and hands, they turned towards each other in company once more, where each had been isolated by the music. They spoke, and Nan could hear their voices, though not what they were saying. Even the dogs showed they were disenchanted, they trotted

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about the room, wagging their plumed tails with as languishing an air as the ladies with their fans, rolling up their eyes in melancholy entreaty to the softest and fattest laps.

The musicians walked out of their green frame and mingled with the others, talking to them as though they too were real. Then Nan saw that what she had taken for a picture was a huge mirror such as she had heard of, which had reflected the group of musicians as they sat in the light of the next window, where they had been hidden from her. She had never seen looking-glass except in a small hand-mirror, and then it was dark and blurred; this great sheet of plate glass that shone on the wall like an upright pool of water was as marvellous to her as any magic picture. All the people in that room, all that they did, had an added grace and power when she could catch their reflections in the mirror.

The page in white and pink had left the room and now re-entered, bearing a tray on which there were a number of very small dishes in brilliant colours, and of the shape of water-lilies; steam issued from them; he came so near her that she could distinguish the pattern on them of dragons and monstrous birds with tails like comets. ,

If she tapped at the pane, one of those bright beings within would come to the window and open it and speak to her. But then what should she say, how explain

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her crouching there like a thief or a gipsy under one of their rose-bushes? For the first time in her life she was conscious that her hair was wild and uncovered and her feet bare, since she had taken off her shoes and stockings to run the more freely as she had used to do at home. If only she were as handsome and commanding as Eliza or as clever as Moll, she might even so have dared. But she, whom Moll had so often told was 'none so pretty,' teasingly twisting her father's pet name for her into a far from complimentary sense, had no weapons to help her face such odds. She prayed that she might not be seen, and when two of the figures approached her window and opened it, her teeth chattered so with fear and excitement that she put her hand in her mouth to keep them from betraying her.

A delicious burnt fragrance stole on the air. Almost she could taste what they were drinking.

'Why do you look out?' said a pretty lisping foreign voice, flicking her words with light disdain into the air. 'There is nothing to look at but clouds and trees. And how dark it grows and how cold.' There was a laugh that sounded like the tinkle of jewels against glass, a tiny clatter, a kiss. 'Look, filthy toad, you have spilt it,' in the same tones but now languishing and tender, too tender for reproach. There came the harsh sound of the window pulled to again.

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Not for some time did Nan venture to raise her head, holding her hands under her left breast where her heart throbbed so loud she thought it would burst.

The candles were now being lit inside the room, destroying what was left there of the daylight. The scene, though clearer, seemed now immeasurably remote, as though the piece of glass through which she peered were that of a telescope into another world.

Card-tables had been brought forward, and small gilded chairs. A group of girls sat on the floor, their skirts spread round them like the shining petals of crocuses. They appeared to be playing some speaking game which occasioned much whispering and laughter, they pretended to ignore the men who leaned across their shoulders and tried to join in. There were windows on two sides of the room, and on the side away from hers the shutters were closed and curtains drawn of green silk, in which there ran a faint pattern like threads of water. As this dark covering was placed round the room, it shone the more brightly; window after window was blotted out; last of all, her window was approached, and once again she crouched, waited, looked up to see that no trace remained to her of that sparkling scene.

She crept away. Once on the common she ran again but this time with the wind on her face. She grew tired buffeting against it. She had to walk. She was not

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sure of her way, and she found that she was very hungry. It began to rain a little. It grew dark. She remembered a story her father had once told her of a bird that flew in at an open window of a lighted room where people feasted and made merry, and out through the door at the other end. That he said was the life of man, no more than the flight of a bird through a crowded room into the silence and darkness whence it came. A man must die, but the world went on and its bustle and laughter, though he had left it, and he was glad to think it. He told Nan not to be sad when he was dead, but to enjoy her life as he had done.

The lighted room lay far behind her, safely enclosed like a precious jewel in midst of the surrounding darkness, the cold wind that blew across the heath, the terrors of the approaching night. Someone might see her and shoot at her for a witch; she might meet a witch herself, or a band of thieves and cut-throats, or the wicked Squire of Tumbleton who by aid of the devil jumped his horse over the church steeple, chipping off a bit with his hoof as you could see to this day, and never came to earth again but still rode through the air on windy nights, thundering over the roof; she might at last see his black horse borne on the air and be snatched up on it and never brought down again.

This fancy had given her defiant joy when a few hours since she had run over the common in daylight,



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the wind blowing her along. But now she only longed to be in bed and have Nurse bending over her, scolding her, holding between her gnarled brown hands a bowl of bread and milk for her.

All that day, Mr. Cork waited and watched for Nan. Mr. Hambridge did not even remark on her absence at supper, though he mentioned her when he talked of a cock-fight he would give sometime against Lord Stoking's birds. His Lordship was staying at his country seat not eight miles off, and might bring over some London gentlemen with him to see the sport.

'But mum's the word to Mrs. Anne,' he said, nudging his chaplain, 'the little jade will be mad to see the visitors from the town, and we want no women at the supper to spoil all.'

Through the night Mr. Cork heard the wind blowing up for rain; with daylight it began, blotting out the landscape. He went into the kitchen to get his breakfast at the hour when Mrs. Anne was accustomed to go for hers. The stone floor steamed under the heat of the fire; the maids tramped in and out, leaving muddy pools in their footsteps; they were commanded to keep the door shut against the rain; the kitchen reeked with warm damp, and smelled of cheese and beer.

Mr. Cork was apt to think that the servants despised him for half belonging, and illegitimately, to their class.

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Their stupid faces and slow-witted speech irritated him, but when he saw sharpness in a servant, some brisk, insolent fellow such as his father must have been, it enraged him to the edge of murder. Now that he wanted to inquire for their mistress or at least her nurse, he envied his patron for what he had formerly despised, the comfort with which he would sit for hours in the kitchen, chatting with his men. Mr. Hambridge conceded to the new-fangled uppish custom of feeding out of the kitchen only as far as supper was concerned, the one formal meal of the day.

Mr. Cork's training in intrigue had not made him a good plotter, but it had taught him to build up obstacles, to fear suspicion, to be chary of showing his anxiety in a household which appeared as little concerned as if a kitten had strolled out of it instead of its mistress. Already he thought they stared at him for staying so long. He went to the long gallery where he walked up and down and wondered whether Mrs. Anne were lost or ravished or murdered or lying ill in her room while he heard nothing of it till she was dead; or whether, in the extravagance of a green-sick maid, she might even have run and killed herself because he had been unkind.

In the midst of his horror his heart gave an exultant leap to think that she should crave his love and fear his power enough to die for it. The gallery was very dark, the rain dripped down the seven windows with a

sucking noise, occasionally it splashed smartly against them, and then he would pause and look out through the small leaded panes of greenish bottle glass on to a world that looked dim and drowning.

He was standing at the end near his own room when round the corner of the other end there came a figure in a quaint, unfamiliar dress, spotted with bright colours. It was Nan, in the dress that Mr. Hambridge's mother had worn as a bride. The stiff embroidered skirts covered her feet; she moved slowly and as if in time to music; her hair was arranged in smooth curls and confined by a comb; her hand, whiter than usual, held a lace handkerchief.

She was a stranger who was yet, as in a dream, identical with some familiar figure. And the familiarity was twofold; some other memory, too far back for him to claim, hammered at his heart and was refused admittance. For Mr. Cork did not know that a lady in a strange bright dress, of the same fashion as Nan now wore, had come to the cottage where he was brought up with other dirty little boys, and spoken softly to him and taken him on her knee, where he had sat gazing down at the thick encrusted pattern of her skirts, here a scarlet flower, and here a cock robin on a twig, here a snail and here a stag and here and there tiny stones, some white, some pink. Yet now, with an echo of that wonder, he stood as though he were a little

boy, timid, worshipping, as he gazed at the embroidery on Nan's old-fashioned dress, the flowers and birds and animals picked out with seed-pearls and corals, the tunic standing out round the waist in a stiff flounce, the lace collar and cuffs set over pink, a dress such as he had not seen since that one day when he had seen his mother.

He brushed his hand across his forehead. He wanted no cobwebs to obscure this meeting that he had foreseen in such various ways. But now that she was at last before him, alive, well, happy, playing a part in which he had had no share, his relief, instead of lifting him on wings as he had expected, fell on him like a stone.

He had lain awake all night in his concern for her, but she had none for him, she had parted from him in anger, she had stayed away from him until the next day, and then she came smiling towards him, absorbed in some mummerly of her own, so callous to his feelings that she was not even conscious of them. She was no better than a heedless and ungrateful child.

She slid backwards and forwards, humming a tune, she lifted her skirts and danced to it, hopping up and down and tapping her heels, mimicking and exaggerating the airs of a fine lady; even when she answered his exasperated questions, she began by singing her replies and told him of her wanderings yesterday with such an

obvious mixture of truth and falsehood that he could not unravel it. Had she really walked as far as Stoking Place and paid a visit on my Lord and Lady? She described the scene in their drawing-room minutely; a blackamoor in a silver turban had lolled by his lady's chair and drank coffee out of her cup, 'but,' said she, 'his lady may have been a man, for she was dressed like one, and she had a high haughty air as though her head were on a coin. And a girl there in white gloves, embroidered in black and silver, opened a gilded cage and out flew a cloud of white sparrows and perched all over her. She held sugar for them and put a crumb on her lip, and a sparrow as white as a dove perched on her chin and took it. And black and white spaniels barked round her feet, asking for the sugar too.'

'Who spoke with you? How did they bring you back? On whose pillion? A servant's?'

'In a coach. No, a flying chariot with six horses. Two sweet gallants accompanied me who talked very wickedly. One boasted of the many poor ladies that had died for love of him, and the other said, "If hearts could break indeed, you'd hear him walking everywhere as on cracked egg-shells."'

He had pictured her dying for his sake and did not care to have that savage but sacred emotion ridiculed. 'You are mad,' he exclaimed. 'None of this last can be true.'

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She turned to the window and stared out upon the rain.

‘Nor it is,’ she said petulantly, ‘but why should you not believe it? It might have happened like that.’

And so it might, if she had been brave enough to tap at the window-pane through which she had peeped at the gallant company at Stoking Place. But she had feared they would send her away for a gipsy, and so had remained crouched beneath a rose-bush, her bare feet planted in the mud, while on the other side of a piece of glass those glittering figures had moved about as in dumb show, since she could not hear what they said to make each other smile or look surprised. She had crept away and run over the common until at last she had found her way home, late and tired out and scared lest someone should shoot at her for a witch; she had gone straight up to bed and Nurse had brought her a bowl of bread and milk, and she was too glad to be there to mind that she had missed her only chance of entering the world.

And this morning in the lumber-room she had found the superb dress that Mrs. Catherine Hambridge had worn when she had kept state at Cricketts Manor and her son was a fat, snivelling child who would not keep out of the filth, though he had his ears boxed for it until one became quite deaf. For which reason he took a particular pleasure in letting the gardens run

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to seed that had been his mother's pride. Mrs. Catherine had been a diminutive pecking shrew, infinitely more dangerous than Lady Ingleby's equine restiveness could make her. Had the two ladies ever encountered, Lady Ingleby would have come off the loser. But Nan thought that only a lovely and gracious woman could wear such a dress and her delight at finding that it fit her was softened by pity for the mother of so uncouth a son. In it, she felt that she had joined the company that yesterday had been no more than a vision.

But the window that she now looked through showed her only a dull, greenish world, and trees that floated about in it like the weeds at the bottom of the river, weeds that had entangled their playfellow, young Tom from the Croft, and held him till he was drowned. The light through the little panes looked as though it came through water. The gallery was like a ship sunk at the bottom of the sea, and she and Mr. Cork were imprisoned in it together.

'Oh,' she sighed, 'how I wish they were here.'

'Your fine company?' But his tone had softened, for he knew that 'they' had always meant her young brothers, and he was sorry for her when she was home-sick. His companionship was beyond her intelligence. Yet he was unwilling to admit his inability to please her, from whatever cause. What did she do with them that he could not? Ball, or battledore and shuttlecock,

such as the fops played in drawing-rooms? He would do more than that to please her, he thought with a catch at his heart, as the childish monkey face that had grown familiar to him looked at him from out of a strange dress, the dress of a lovely and gracious woman.

He said, 'Will you not show me how to play the games you had at home?'

'But you are old,' she exclaimed.

He set his jaw and looked ten years older.

'Did you not once tell me that your father was so kind as to play with you?'

She gaped upon him, stupefied. Her father could twist his fat face into outrageous grimaces, dance about the room, imitate a coy Court lady or the baboon Captain Holmes had brought back from Guinea, or a German merchant as round and smooth as a ball whom he had seen cheating at cards and looking as innocent as a church under his high-crowned hat, stuck like a steeple on top of a dome. He never minded how silly he looked or who saw him. But the notion of Mr. Cork's grim face, made to look ridiculous, shocked her. A sudden rush of laughter came to her relief, she leaned against the wall, she covered her face with her hands.

'Oh—but you——' she gasped, feeling the danger in that icy stillness that surrounded her laughter. 'I do not know why I am laughing so—but you—you would be different—you are not like that.'



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He knew that she was telling him he could never give her the pleasure that her father and brothers had given. He was condemned and found wanting before he had even been tried.

Something deeper than his constant pride was hurt. He had betrayed his tenderest part to her; in his pity for her solitude he had lowered himself to offer to play the child for her sake. He had shown kindness to what he had taken to be a defenceless creature, and now it bit his hand.

She wiped her eyes and looked up at him, the laughter rushed out of her face, it turned pitiful, imploring, but still he did not speak, and though she moved her lips, no word would come through them. As on the previous day, she turned and ran from him, not as then, half in mischief, but in terror.

Once again he paced that cold corridor alone, and seven squares of bleak and storm-swept country gave him his only hope of escape. There came into his mind the words of a brother Puritan who had fought more single-heartedly and suffered worse than he, whose cry rose from a prison cell: 'Whilst we wrangle here in the dark we are dying.'

Ambition had failed him, his friends had forsaken him, he had no faith in the religion he professed and made his trade. And he too was dying, as was the young girl who had run from him in a dead woman's

dress, for each day brought them nearer to their death. We live but once, he told himself, and what, he asked, is there left?

His answer met him in the pulpit next day. On opening the sermon that he had placed there early that morning, he saw scrawled across the first page:

‘Dere Mr. Corke praie doe not bee angrie.’

He stared at it so long that the congregation thought he had lost the beginning of his sermon.

He had not spoken with Nan since their meeting in the gallery. She had appeared at supper in her ordinary dress, had sat silent through the meal and retired earlier than usual. He had supposed her to be sulking. Her face was pale and there were heavy rims round her eyes; for an instant he had hoped that their quarrel had made her unhappy also. But he had reflected that she might only be tired after her escapade of the day before, and this at once checked his rising tenderness. She had shown him she wanted nothing from him; she should then have nothing. He had shut his heart tight lest any wandering kindness should again issue from it towards her.

And now in the pulpit, before all the watching eyes of his congregation, her plea for his kindness confronted him. He knew the labour it must have taken her to pen those few straggling words. She did not then ridicule

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him as he had thought, she was afraid of him, she wanted his kindness and feared to ask it except in the house of God where he could not answer her.

But he would answer. He turned in the three-decker pulpit to address the congregation, he reversed the great hour-glass that stood in its stand of wrought iron, decked with fleur-de-lis, and gave out his text but with no chapter and verse, saying only in the strained voice of one who dreams, 'Pray do not be angry.'

It became evident to them, at first with wonder and then admiration, and then forgetfulness of all method, that contrary to his custom he spoke extempore. Even the deaf sexton listened, though he could not catch a word that came from those urgent lips.

Mr. Cork who had been angry all his life, preached against anger. 'Of what use is it to any man that he should eat his heart out in the cage of life?' he asked of all the bovine faces, placidly upturned to his. Many a time he had looked down on them and seen them as the faces of white swine, penned in their pews instead of styes. Now he preached only to his own heart. The world was evil, men were brutal, women false, these were the iron bars that bound humanity. Yet of what use to be angry since we ourselves are of the same stuff as those we rail against? Only by love could we understand this, for to hurt and to be hurt

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by one we loved was to discover in ourselves a cruelty worse than the tiger's.

'Wild beasts prey upon an alien kind. It is left for man to torture his friends.' His thought had broken from him as if torn from his lips; for a moment he stared in silence over the church, and then, 'What is there in life,' cried that white burning face, 'if we leave it, not knowing love?'

At the word love, Bess Tiddle, at the back of the church, simpered and felt her earrings; Mr. Hambridge woke from a brief doze and straightway fell into another; beside him, Nan, whose eyes had not dared move from before her, now looked up, alert and quivering. She leaned a little forward, her arms spread slightly on either side of her, the finger-tips just touching the wooden seat. She seemed poised for flight as she sat there bound deep in the box-pew to the side of her slumbering husband.

As he looked down on them, pity and rage again tore Mr. Cork's heart, and with them an emotion that now he could recognize and exult in, while he preached in praise of love, of life, of the unexpected beauties that grow in it and catch the weary traveller unaware.

To Nan, now gazing up at that towering figure, it seemed that a cloud had swept away from his face and the glory of God appeared in it as the sun shines out after storm.

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Silence fell on the church. Then, rustling and scraping, the congregation rose, and in that instant before the glory fled from her, the air seemed to echo with the beat of mighty wings.

On a stone outside Mr. Hambridge's pew was an inscription without name or date, blurred by the perpetual passage of feet. Nan had looked at it every time she had entered or left the pew; lately, she had been able to decipher it. This time as the service ended and she stepped into the aisle, her foot under its pink rosette remained poised an instant above that mute supplication. 'What is there in life,' Mr. Cork had asked, 'if we leave it, not knowing love?' And here beneath her feet lay that ghostly message, exhorting her, not to repentance but response.

Dere Frend repent, mak no delaye.  
I in my prime Was Snatcht awaye.

She did not recognize this whisper from the dead as an echo from her own irreligious heart, the prayer that she had unconsciously breathed ever since she had sat in that pew beside Mr. Hambridge. 'Please God send me love soon and not through my husband.'

It had still been raining when they had entered; now outside the dark church the graves were bright as emerald, the thin trees gold, and the sharp autumnal breeze chased the drops from them like a shower of

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jewels. Mr. Cork had shown his true face, the sun had come out, and Nan stepped from the porch into a new world.

Round her, voices were speaking in perplexity and complaint of the sermon. Even the deaf sexton could subscribe to the general dissatisfaction with something too strange to be right. 'Never even turned the hour-glass,' said he, who had once been accustomed to see the sands run through a third time every Sunday. In this weaker and degenerate age, sermons were not what they had been.

And there in front of them as if to prove the change was Joe Haskins, laboriously walking on his square toes up the churchyard path and opening his mouth and eyes as round as three pennies to find himself confronted with the congregation already coming out. For Joe, seeing that the rain had stopped and counting on a service of legitimate length, had slipped out of church soon after the service began and returned later, thinking to slip in as quietly again. He was finely caught, and by the Squire himself at the head of the congregation, who was yawning so that his face seemed split into two red halves, and stopped like that in a grinning gape at the sight of Joe Haskins.

'Caught you, my fine fellow!' he shouted. 'I'll find out what you've been doing. I'll have you put in the stocks, God's body so I will for getting the better of

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us all like this. Here all of you,' he called to the devout flock that were following their shepherd, 'here's Joe Haskins thinking to get the better of us by playing truant from church, but we'll pay him back with rotten apples when he's in the stocks for it.'

He shook himself to and fro with laughter and all the people on the path laughed too and carried the news back over their shoulders to those behind. Mr. Hambridge was not ill-natured but the stocks appealed to him as an exquisitely witty form of punishment, an opinion which was shared by his village, who thought him a just and a merry gentleman. It was not right that one of their company should mind his own business or pleasure while they had to sit in the church attending to God's. Small reason he would have to praise the shortness of the sermon they were all discussing.

All through supper that evening Mr. Hambridge told them how the rascal Joe had run along to the Broad Close to serve cattle, and finding a bull, put him into a pound and baited him with a dog until he was weary of the sport. There was a lad of mettle, to think he could amuse himself on a Sunday morning with a bull-baiting while the rest of them had to cramp their toes in church listening to Little Benjamin's sermons.

'*Little* Benjamin, hey? Look at him. Over two yards high, like the King himself, he'll tell you. Did

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they call you Benjamin because of your height, or weren't you as tall then? I dare say not, I dare say not,' and he shook his head profoundly. For once he was talking more than anybody, for once those two chatter-boxes who thought themselves so clever were sitting silent, not moving, not even looking at each other; they sat as if enchanted.

He saw them less and less clearly, sometimes they seemed quite close and sometimes far away, two poor-spirited white-faced numskulls who could not know when to laugh at his jokes, who grew ever more insignificant and more indistinct, until at last he could see them no longer, for the table had risen and swum over his head.

As his voice ceased and he sank from their company, the room seemed to grow the fuller. The silence throbbed in their ears, they could now look nowhere but at each other.

Admiration, awe, respect, these Nan felt for the first time and took for love. She longed to speak to Mr. Cork, but feared to disappoint him. She would never again be thoughtless and silly, she would never hurt him again.

The servants were dragging Mr. Hambridge from beneath the table. His now almost unconscious face rose slowly before her sight, it had sunk sideways on to his shoulder, the mouth was half open in a foolish



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grin, the eyes were fixed and staring. She looked on her husband's face as if for the first time; a strange grief beset her; she began to cry, to cover her face with her hands, and sob between them, 'Is this all? Is this all?' but she did not know what she meant, she did not know what to do, she would not now look at Mr. Cork, and suddenly she ran from the room.

Nurse bent over her loom. She sat close to the small window for the light, and the profile of her nose and chins tied up in the white handkerchief that, fastened round her cap and neck, were like three potatoes in a bag. She was weaving the first dress Nan had ever had made for her; it would take about a year to finish, for Nurse could not give much time to it, 'but you shall have it to wear at your baby's christening.'

The shuttle danced in and out, carrying its thread now into the sunlight and now into the shadow. Nurse answered its faint rattle with a crooning tune that Nan had heard her sing to it since she was a baby:

Shuttle, weave both warp and woof,  
Send my love beneath this roof.

A girl had once sat weaving in her cottage doorway when the King's son rode down the street, and to her shuttle she spoke the words that Nurse now sang, and the shuttle sprang from the loom and went dancing

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after the King's son. He turned to see a beautiful pattern of trees and flowers and animals being woven behind him. He rode back over the magic tapestry until he found that it came from the girl's cottage, and entered beneath her roof and led her away.

But things did not happen like that nowadays.

'Nurse, dear Nurse——'

'Well, chuck?'

'Do you not think the chaplain looks nobly at times?'

'I think he looks like a starved crow. But there, I know nothing of nobility. I know something of you though, Miss, and I think jollity would suit your father's child better.'

'So I used to think,' said Nan pensively, 'but I have changed. There is much in me that you do not know.'

'I know you will never be like your sister Alice, however long you pull down your face. All these fantods of who you like and what you are like, they'd blow away fast enough if you had a lively crowing brat in your arms. That's the best cure for the vapours. Get your baby, and if your husband won't give you one, I'll not ask who does.'

'Hush! Listen! There is a coach on the road.'

Nan's head and shoulders were out of the window. 'Nurse, it's turned at the gates. It's coming down the drive.'

So often had a phantom messenger driven up at

home with news from the King. 'Coach, carriage, wheelbarrow, cart,' all four had had the power to bring Sir Roderick and his children to the window in an ecstasy of anticipation.

Nan could still await the King's messenger, the King himself, as she watched the yellow coach wheels come to a stand among the uprising whirl of pigeons. The door was pushed open before the coach was still; there protruded from it a large portion of bony shank and a stiff broad-brimmed hat. Nan dropped beside Nurse and put her head in her lap. 'It is my mother,' she said.

'And is that any reason for knocking away my shuttle, a great girl like you to go flinging yourself about like a baby?' But Nurse's true thought was muttered not quite inaudibly as she replaced her shuttle and patted and tried to smooth Nan's hair: 'Now what has brought the grey mare out of her stable?'

The thought of her husband had brought Lady Ingleby. Gossip had at last reached her of the peculiar matrimonial conditions at Cricketts Manor. Her instinct was to let matters alone, but it occurred to her that this was just what her husband would have done. She recalled his lack of fixed principles, of standards of behaviour, of any reason for thinking or doing one thing rather than another. In fact he never thought and never argued. Logical and controversial, Lady

Ingleby was the more determined to have a settled standard of conduct decided by the best reasons the mind could accord. She could refer to this code of ethics in any matter at a moment's notice; it at once pronounced her late husband's probable conduct with regard to his son-in-law as shallow and negligent, typical of all men in that it shirked a difficult and unpleasant duty. As soon as the word duty came into her mind she sent for the hired coach from Rampton.

'Go and greet your mother, bud,' said Nurse, pulling her refractory charge to the door.

'I'll not go. I might not have seen her. I'll wait till she sends for me. I know she has come to scold me.'

'And small wonder if she has heard how you keep house.'

'Dear Nurse, do you see her first and say I am learning. Please, Nurse——'

They were still at it when Lady Ingleby marched into the room. Nurse curtsied. Nan knelt for her blessing. Neither looked as much surprised as they should have done if they were to appear ignorant of her arrival. But Lady Ingleby wasted no time in inquiring why she was not welcomed. She settled herself in the tall chair, crossed one leg high over the other, and called to Nurse in a voice like the crack of a whip, 'Never tell me you are cooking pigeon-pies already.'

She must have nosed out the kitchens from the back

of the hall, and Nurse was after all to bear the first brunt. Nan suppressed a giggle of delight as Lady Ingleby proceeded to tell them that at this rate they would kill off the dovecot by the New Year and have nothing but their Martinmas beef for the rest of the winter. Suddenly her mother swerved on to her and said, 'This is what comes of neglecting your duties. Too idle aren't you to lock up even the spice-box?'

'But Nurse does it all, Ma'am, and much better than I could.'

'Unnatural!' exclaimed Lady Ingleby, who had little thought that a daughter of hers could think someone else would keep house better than herself.

Nurse in self-defence diverted the attack. They were curing meat for the winter as fast as they could, she said.

'And what of beans?' interrupted Lady Ingleby on a deep note. Nurse reassured her. All the beans that could be spared had been salted or cured, there was no waste anywhere. This present orgy of pigeon-pies was in honour of a supper that the master was giving to-night after a cock-fight in the tithe barn against my Lord Stoking's birds. My Lord himself and one or two other gentlemen were riding over for the fight and had sent word that they would not stay to supper on account of the distance and the dark roads, for now the weather had turned so cloudy there was small chance of the moon showing its face. But there would be

all the yeomen farmers and country gentlemen round who would have no such scruples about getting home. Where they supped they would breakfast, and no need to provide beds for them, they would sit round the table until they fell under it.

‘See to it that your mistress is in bed before any of the company arrives.’

Nurse promised. Nan promised. It cost her little, since Lord Stoking’s party from the town were not coming up to the house. She longed to hear more talk of them. She wished she dared tell her mother of the glimpse she had had through the windows of Stoking House, and so prompt further gossip. She said merely, ‘I hear that one of the ladies there dresses like a man, and keeps a blackamoor.’

It was a happy move. With a snort like the war-horse when he sayeth ‘ha, ha!’ Lady Ingleby charged the modern fashions and morals. She had no patience with these women who aped the men, wore horsemen’s coats and periwig hats or caps with ribands and laced bands instead of modest hoods, lost their virginity as soon, interfered with politics, appointed ministers, which was why they were all young and lively instead of old and wise, brought on wars, seized all the money.

‘What can the men have come to, I should like to know,’ she cried, as though she had never met such a man in her life, ‘who can allow the women to manage

their affairs for them?' But then the men in their turn were just like women, they cared for nothing but dancing and music and idle experiments that only led them to question everything from witchcraft and water-divining, whereas any fool knew what harm was done by the first and what use was made of the latter.

Nan had occasionally heard her mother talk like this and paid no heed to it because it answered to nothing in her head, it was just her mother's way of scolding the world. But now she knew from Mr. Cork that the Royal Society had discovered spiders preserved in amber, and pieces of unicorn's horn, and that the Duke of Buckingham loved to make red glass. Without confessing her escapade, she too could show her knowledge of the world.

'I heard,' she said, 'that the King ordered Mr. Wren to make him a globe of the moon which he keeps among the curiosities in his cabinet and that there are hills and hollows in it which make the shadows we see on the face of the moon.'

'Indeed,' said Lady Ingleby, 'and will you tell me of what use that is to anyone?'

She regarded her daughter with surprised attention. Nan, not yet a wife, had already changed greatly from the half-savage child who would do what she was told only when faced with the alternative of a beating. She set up to think for herself, and before her mother

too, and gave her opinion with a confidence that must have been bred by her conversation with that proud upstart scholar, for of conversation with her husband she could have had none. She was not at all sure that the change was in the right direction.

‘I cannot see why,’ she said to Nurse, ‘that I should be cursed with yet another unwomanly daughter.’

Nurse made a clucking sound expressive of no opinion except general sympathy, and sought to turn the current by asking after Eliza.

‘Humph,’ said Lady Ingleby and fell into a silence from which she presently emerged to ask Nurse what she thought of marrying her to Mr. Wake.

Nurse thought nothing of it. ‘A man of that age! Where are her children to come from?’

Lady Ingleby was of opinion that no one could make a worse mother than Eliza, and that she might make a worse marriage. He was absent-minded but she never noticed it. She was morose but he never noticed it. Their union would be on the basis of letting each other alone, a very modern affair.

But the globe of the moon still disturbed her thoughts. It was a saying that no one had ever seen the other side of the moon; she would like to know that she had seen it, but then, as she had said, to what purpose?

‘Men delight in such tricks and fancies,’ she said to Nan, so close on her last remarks that at first they



thought she was still discussing Mr. Wake's marriage with Eliza, 'but you should show yourself a woman by now.'

Women it seemed were made of sterner stuff, and yet men were contemptible if they let them manage their affairs for them. But Nan did not ponder this long. She was busy considering her mother's hat.

Twenty years ago it had been a cavalier hat of soft leather and sumptuous curves belonging to Sir Roderick, a plume had then waved from its brim, but the only reminder of that was the square steel buckle which stuck up with an empty and forlorn air like a gate that led to nowhere in the midst of a desert. The hat was now as stiff as a board and indeterminate in colour, by reason not merely of all the rains and hard wear it had withstood, but also of that sympathy that causes clothes, like servants, when old and constant, to grow like their masters. Many of Lady Ingleby's garments looked as though they were made of wood, and the hat that had once been unmistakably Sir Roderick's could now by no possibility belong to anyone but his widow.

All her life Nan had regarded this object only as a symbol of maternal authority, to be avoided with dread haste whenever it suddenly protruded itself among the branches in the orchard or over the wall of the vegetable patch when the young peas were tender enough to eat raw. But now for the first time her attention was

emancipated, and when her mother talked of modest hoods she saw, as any dispassionate observer might have done, that her mother was wearing a hat, and a man's hat. A spell had been broken, scales had fallen from her eyes, which turned at Lady Ingleby's mention of the disgraceful modern skirts that displayed the wearer's legs for fully two or three inches above the ankle, to Lady Ingleby's own voluminous skirts of a nondescript dust colour. They had been looped up by various tapes and strings in so partial and erratic a fashion that whereas they trailed in some places to the danger of her heels, in others they displayed an uninterrupted view of her knee, stockinged in thick black cloth.

To accuse such a spectacle of immodesty was as impossible as to accuse an ancient hornbeam of displaying its gnarled joints. But a glimmering perception of her inconsistency aroused in Nan the nearest approach to affection she had ever felt for her mother. It was quickly rewarded, for Lady Ingleby, following the course of her daughter's glance, did a thing which made Nan realize her new status as a married woman. She explained herself.

"If I wear a hat and loop up my skirts," she said, "it is for my own comfort and convenience and not for the fashion."

Then since her mother did not follow the fashion, the fashion must be following her. In any case this

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condescension had set her at liberty to conjecture. 'Maybe, Ma'am, the modern fashion is also for comfort and convenience.'

But that was too much. Fashion she was told had no motive but to render its votaries conspicuous.

As for all this talk about modern comfort, what need was there for chairs that one could loll and lounge in as long as there was a comfortable bed in the house, or for larger windows and lighter rooms since there was plenty of light out of doors? Young people talked about their eyes now in a way they should be ashamed to do at ninety. 'And why pray should the very furniture be cosseted? I hear they put rugs from Persia on the tables as if even they should be kept warm, or is it that the modesty they will not extend to their own legs, covers those of the tables in compensation?' China? It was not to be mentioned. She had heard that even the young men of the town collected it, and for her part would sooner have seen her sons wielding swords against each other on opposite sides in the late civil wars, than dandling vases in degraded effeminacy.

A craze for china has ever had a strong effect on the heart of our nation. In righteous indignation, *Punch*, that British champion of the 1870's, discovered that our young men were addicted to strange vices, the worst and newest of them being blue china. And 'vices—fopperies and fripperies—' said Lady Ingleby on the

same subject a couple of centuries earlier, 'affectations—nonsense.'

Her tongue darted between her teeth like a lizard, she threw back her head and crossed and uncrossed her legs, flinging her skirts the higher with each unguarded movement. She had not expected to enjoy her visit so much. Nurse had brought her a large piece of the abused pigeon-pie and a bumper of sherry sack. 'Never let me see tea in my daughter's house,' said Lady Ingleby, 'people will poison themselves to be modish as they call it. They will even take these new hot Eastern drinks of tea and coffee for breakfast instead of wholesome British beer. These young women who take to tea-drinking ought to be whipped.'

Nan quivered, flung back her head, tried vainly to remember a certain delectable burnt fragrance. Was it tea? Was it coffee? Would she ever know the taste of these strange, wicked drinks?

Suddenly Lady Ingleby remembered the object of her visit. Was the marriage consummated or not? Well then, since it was not, why had Nurse sent her no message and why had Nan not managed to preserve appearances at least by inducing her husband to spend the last two or three hours of the night or rather morning in her bed, if only to get his first sleep there? The great thing was to make a beginning. The Queen herself had had to endure the company of Barbara Palmer

or Castlemaine or Cleveland as she was now, yet that proud whore who clutched all these titles and half the wealth of the kingdom to her lap, was now forced to entertain her successful French rival, and practise a humiliating friendship with her to the extent of trying on each other's hats in public for all the world to see. Mighty melancholy the old favourite had looked under it too, for all that she had a yellow plume in hers that far exceeded Madame Frog's. Which was satisfactory, since it showed that fate, like everything else, followed a rule and brought in due time its exact revenges. And now what had *Mrs.* Anne to say for herself?

Nan hung her head and looked wooden, a dull, disobedient child. At last she said that Bess had been there before she came, and things were very well as they were.

'Have you no decency? No proper pride? Do you wish always to remain a virgin? Don't you wish your husband to love you, fool?'

'No, Ma'am.' She had nearly said it, her lips framed the words but did not make the sound. She would have enjoyed saying it, there was no reason now, that she was free from her mother, why she should not; she even discerned dimly that her mother would like her the better, and that it might be the beginning of a friendship such as they could never have enjoyed while she was under her authority. But the habit of lying to

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her had been formed from infancy, it was too strong to break so lightly.

So she stood 'muttering there,—afraid to speak up,' as Lady Ingleby complained, unreasonably, for she had been astonished and rather put out by the extent to which Nan had already spoken up. 'She was there before I came,' indeed. It might have been her father speaking in the silly way he had of making every case appear a separate instance instead of chained each to each by the laws of consistency. There had been no way of dealing with him, no means of foreseeing how he would act.

And in a frightening flash of memory, she saw him as he had been in that brief time when he had been in love with her; a powerful young man, laughing and teasing, carrying her about as though she were a child instead of the tallest and shrewdest of her family; frantic when jealous, yet showing it not in anger but in an added urgency, almost an agony in his love-making. And once when she had no notion what she had done to rouse him, he lay at her feet and looked up at her with a strange light flame in his eyes, telling her that if she killed him now she would have him her own for ever. He had terrified her, his submission was that of some great fierce beast, she had covered her eyes to keep from seeing it, and wished she were at home again with her nurse and her mother and people who behaved

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like reasonable human beings. She wished she could love him more or he love her less. And before she could realize it both these things came to pass, so that though he was merry and good-humoured with her she never again saw him wild and unreasonable with her. For the rest of his life she tried to make him so.

‘Why didn’t I know how to love him earlier?’ she asked herself. ‘They teach girls to read and write, to sew their samplers, sometimes even Latin and Greek, but what is the use of all that if they don’t know how to love in time?’ The wildness of her thought would have astounded her if she had had time to consider it, but her whole life was racing through her mind, a race in which she always came too late.

There stood her youngest daughter before her, the girl moved lightly, her hips were straight, her breasts small and firm, she was married yet she was still free, a virgin. Should this brat escape her obligations where a character as much stronger as her mother had had to pay? It was against nature, she did not know what girls were coming to, Nan must yield as she had yielded, or else—else she would know that perhaps she herself might have directed her life better, that she had not always been strong, that she too might have been freer to carry a light heart. She could not bear to think that. If she had failed, it was because all womankind was doomed to failure.

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A gust of rain splashed against the small leaded panes so that the scene outside looked dark and of a wintry grey. The east wind had not dried the roads sufficiently, and Lady Ingleby had to leave at once lest any further rain should increase the mud. She rose wearily and demanded to see her son-in-law.

‘Mr. Hambridge is very busy somewhere about a badger,’ said Nan chivalrously. Then, as Lady Ingleby did not look very credulous, she added, ‘indeed I do not think he is returning to the house before the cock-fight, and the tithe barn is five fields off.’

‘When you tell a lie,’ said her mother, ‘must you tell so many?’

She strode out of the house and ran Mr. Hambridge to earth in a stable. One of the grooms said afterwards that he jumped into the stall to hide from her but that she hauled him out, ‘and by the Lord Harry I thought she would have basted him with his own riding-crop.’

The encounter cheered her flagging spirits for a moment, she instructed the coachman Jake to cut at Bess Tiddle with his whip as she stood gaping at the Lodge door, and departed in a satisfaction that was allayed only when one of the wheels got wedged in the mud and she had to sit in a ditch for close on two hours before it could be dug out.

She shifted her position from one damp patch of moss to another, her chin sunk in her hands, her



hooded eyelids dropping over her tired old eyes as she surveyed the rain-filled clouds, and the mud that for thirty years had isolated her from all company but that of her household.

All over the waste heath, the furze bushes stuck up in shapeless black spikes into the grey air. Another winter was fast approaching. She thought of the long sunless months, of the drip of rain in the courtyard and the winds that every year sought out her rheumatism more cunningly, of solitude, of salt meat, since it was ruinous to kill the half-starved winter sheep, of old age that was settling on her like a longer winter with no hope of spring to come, crippling her bones, numbing her blood and her perceptions, so that nothing any longer had the importance it had once possessed. Like the surrounding scene, her brain seemed cloudy and her life a meaningless waste.

She had given birth to many lives, but in this moment of returned despair, the sharper because her rare visit had enlivened her, she could perceive in them no more form and purpose than in these black scrubs that sprouted out of the waste land. Her Hal was now Sir Henry and much good it had done him; he trailed his title through half the Courts of Europe as his ancestor had trailed a pike, and to as little purpose; he dared not come home because of his debts; he never wrote. All her thoughts and prayers and wishes for him must

have died before they reached him, since they could blossom into no answering sign of kindness from him. Of all her children she had had some pride and entertainment only from Moll, now Maria, who had reached the town, and perhaps that was why.

A woman was not meant to live alone, even in her household, like a toad in a hole. Company, gaiety, the bustle of shops, people of her own kind nodding their heads, agreeing with her, all that might have made her forget that she was growing old, that she was a poor weak woman whom no one had ever sufficiently helped. But it was a mistake to think of 'weak women.' They had the sense; if they could rule affairs, life might be more tolerable. If she could order the State it was little she would care for persons, King or Protector. She would make good roads, that was all she would care for.

And before her haggard and indomitable eyes there passed a vision of smooth straight roads, so well built and drained that they could proceed over marsh and fen, bringing provisions, talk, company to the loneliest homesteads, enabling mothers to visit their married daughters, and sons their mothers, making of life a many-coloured intricate pattern instead of one grey monotonous thread. She did not want to influence indirectly as the women did now, but to give orders, to have people acknowledging and praising her work,

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to be told publicly in speeches or better still in letters that would last for ever, that she was doing what no woman, and not merely no woman but no one had ever done before.

Along the smooth road of her prophetic vision, there passed a stream of easily driven vehicles, carrying civilization into the rural desert. A host of independent Englishwomen would also march with long strides down those roads of the future, seeking good hard exercise between their parish organizations, their committees or their political contests; they also would regard themselves as the pioneers of their generations; but though her lonely imaginations had helped to place these on their stoutly shod feet, she could not recognize them, nor know that she was of their company.

Mr. Hambridge brought his guests back late from the tithe barn. Nan heard their boots tramping into the hall and their gruff good-humoured voices. Mr. Hambridge's did not sound so good-humoured as usual and no wonder after his encounter with her mother. All the servants were tittering about it. Perhaps he had lost the match as well. In any case it was more amusing for him downstairs with his company than for her alone in her room with Nurse. The tallow candles guttered and smelled disgustingly. They were stuck in magnificent silver sconces as her mother had noticed.

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'Fine state here in his father's day,' she had said, 'but he himself keeps the place like a pigsty.'

Clear candlelight spread from tapers of finest wax; broad windows of plate glass to let in the daylight in a flood instead of the chequered pattern of small dim panes; smooth gilded walls instead of tapestry; shining silks; frank speech and laughter and the free company of men with women; this world that grew lighter every day went on outside the dark room where Nan sat with her Nurse and listened to the revelry of her husband and his friends below.

'What are they saying now do you think? Why are they laughing?'

But Nurse would repeat the old formula, 'Ask no questions and you'll get told no lies.' She would go on grumbling about the maids here, how inferior they were to those at home, how she would not put up with it another day if it were not for her charge, and that what Nan would do without her she did not know, starved outright she would be and more ragged than she was now, since she was incapable of putting in a stitch for herself. And as to that impudent Keziah, put her down, she *would*, if she had to take a slipper to her.

Nan's waning interest revived in the middle of a yawn. 'Why, what has she done to you?'

'Done? No chance for that much I can tell you. But bragging and boasting and picking and stealing

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that I will *not* have. Said straight out to me, she did, and proud of it, "Well, whatever I may do, I don't flick my hair with lard like some old women. I do use a bit of butter to it." "

Nurse was so much offended at Nan's laughter that she put her to bed earlier than usual, snuffed out the candles, and left to get her own supper. Nan lay within the drawn curtains and heard the noise rise upward in increasing waves like a swelling tide. Mr. Cork left it early. She heard his step mounting the stair and go down the long gallery to his room. There he would be beyond all sound of it, he would read until he forgot it and all else. Or would he sit staring, not at his book, but beyond it at the opposite wall, as she had sometimes caught him lately at their studies in the oak room, the idle page unturned before him as he looked at the dark panels, seeing not them either but some image of his mind?

A louder roar drove away her image of him, so immediate was it that she guessed the oak-room door to be open, and when she got up and opened her own, she discovered this to be the case. Someone was bawling out the catch of an old cavalier ditty. When she was a very young child it had been dangerous to sing that song, she remembered singing it in the village street at home and Chris and the other children running from her as the sheriff's man rode through. She had

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been braver than all the boys, and here she was sent to bed like a child while the men made merry below. It was a poor thing to be a woman, at any rate in the country. She wished she were singing and laughing too, but as another roar of laughter burst on her ears she drew back into her room and jumped into bed. The sound frightened her, it was so huge and silly and beyond any control, as though it had come from it did not know where and might lead to it did not know what.

And now though her door was shut, the sound did indeed seem nearer, surging upwards in a mighty and continuous wave towards her. A trampling of heavy boots was again mingled in it, the men had come out of the oak room, they were coming up the stairs, they were coming to her room. She lay for an instant in a cold sweat, unable, as in a nightmare, to move hand or foot. They were just outside her door, fumbling at the handle, she heard Mr. Hambridge's voice, very thick and muddy, reeling out, 'See for yourselves, I say, you can see for yourselves.'

She sprang from her stupor, seized the curtains above her head and climbed up the post. The bed was a high one with a wooden roof, she had scrambled over the edge and was lying flat on it, face downwards, by the time they had burst into the room, her husband in front, still telling them they should see for themselves

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this wren, this starveling sparrow that had been foisted on him by its rapacious dam.

‘Why what an insect dragon it must be under such a Saint George!’ one barked out in a hurry lest his wit should be lost in his hiccoughs, and a very sleepy, drawling voice said twice over so as to get it clear, ‘Say rather the pea under the nine mattresses.’

A feeble light rolled upwards over the walls, chased by great shadows of moving figures. By stretching her head a little, Nan could see that one of them was carrying a rushlight in the oak stand that usually stood on a shelf at the bottom of the stairs. It swayed and guttered, she thought it should be an easy matter to flap it out with the curtain and then escape in the darkness and confusion. But fear kept her from the attempt, as did shame from the simpler resort of screaming to the servants. She would not be found by them in such a plight, she lay stiff and taut as the men drew back the curtains, called to her, and then exclaimed at her absence, shouted ‘Gone away,’ rummaged the bedclothes, looked under the bed and behind the furniture. They were too drunk, she thought, to limb up the bed; but her eyes scanned the edge backwards and forwards for an encroaching hand, fat, red and fumbling, her husband’s hand, in which as soon as it appeared, she would fasten her teeth until they met in the middle.

A strange exultation came upon her; she was free of

those creatures below, they could do nothing to her, 'nothing, nothing,' she said to herself through her clenched teeth, not even if they killed her, for her husband and his friends were nothing to her. And if she could have remembered it at such a moment, it would have amazed her that once she had wept at sight of her husband's drink-sodden face.

The search was slackening; someone yawned; someone else asked why they had left the drink, and the question was acclaimed with ardour. They had not looked too thoroughly and perhaps Mr. Hambridge had no great wish that they should; he had vindicated himself to his fellows, he had shown them and himself he was a lad of spirit and not to be cowed by any woman, even though he had been caught by one.

'How do I know which of the grooms she's sleeping with?' he shouted when they grumbled that he had led them a dance for nothing. Having restored his self-respect with this sally he was lurching out of the room, when a mouse gave a shrill squeak and sprang out into the midst of his company. They did not see what it was and were startled into an ignominious rout, for one fell against his neighbour and sent him crashing to the floor, the others cried out to know what was happening, and the man who had knocked the other down swore at him for a clumsy fool.

Bewildered and blundering, the heavy nightmare



rolled away, resurged down the stairs and left Nan lying trembling and sick with exhaustion on top of the bed.

She could not stay in this room for the rest of the night, she could not be alone. She would go and find Nurse. She slid down the post and stepped back only just in time to avoid treading on the prone figure of a man that lay half concealed by the bed-curtains. The door had been left open, and a faint light from the passage lay for a little way inside the room. She lifted back the curtain and distinguished the dim outline of a shoulder as still as that of a dead man. He lay face downwards, his neck hidden by the curls of his peruke. The light from outside caught the puckers and creases of satin on his coat so that little hills and paths, shining like silver, ran among the deep pools of shadow. His hand was outstretched, long and passive, like a dead hand, and on it a ring sparkled with subdued splendour in the half-darkness. She thought of the hand, fat, red and fumbling, that she had watched for and waited to bite. And suddenly the room seemed full again of huge and staggering shadows, of stupid laughter.

She would not go to Nurse. Nurse would pet and dandle her but Nurse would tell her it was her duty to love her husband no matter what he did, and to try and make him love her, and that when she carried his child within her womb, then she would know that men mattered little once they had served their purpose, as

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she should know herself for she had been a flighty wench, carrying on with one man and then another until she had her children and knew that that was all it was for.

But now Nan thought that if she were with child by Mr. Hambridge she would kill herself before she bore it. She was trembling, she had to shut her teeth tight together to prevent them from chattering aloud, she longed for something violent to happen, a thunder-bolt, the house on fire, sudden death, anything that would provide some wild escape from this intolerable present.

And once again, as though she were looking through a small window at a scene very far away, she saw Mr. Cork sitting in his room at the end of the gallery, hearing nothing, knowing nothing of her torment, reading in old books, or perhaps not reading, perhaps staring, not at his book but at the opposite wall, seeing there some image of his mind, an image that was perhaps herself, as she now saw his image.

She took the curtain in her hand to step past it and that still figure. But as she did so, the words of a round game she had often played with the others at home came into her head of themselves and went round and round like children dancing.

Oh once I get into the briary bush,  
I'll never get out any more.

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That was the wrong way round, she had never got it wrong before. But wrong it stayed, dancing round and round, while she gazed down at the man that was asleep or stunned or dead or only drunk, and wondered why she did not move to go to Mr. Cork. Still she looked at him and still she held the curtain.

Oh hangman stay your hand,  
Oh stay it for a while.

Another ring of words had danced in on the same tune. She dropped the curtain and the man on the floor was now only a dark and shapeless lump beneath it.

There he lay, blotted out.

She stole out of the room and down the passage to the long gallery. In the grey darkness lay seven squares of moonlight. She stood hesitating, fearing to pass through them, at last she moved, walking slowly at first, and then broke into a run, in and out of the white squares, now a shadow, now a ghost, flitting faster and faster down the long gallery and through the door at the end.

Mr. Cork sat there, staring at the opened door. His books lay on the table before him. He stood up. His face had gone chalk white round the deep shadows in it.

Nan's teeth began to chatter again, she stood there wringing her hands and looking at him, she could find nothing to say.

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At last he said, 'So you have come.'

She wanted to tell him why, but she could not find the words, she began to, but he was not listening, and it did not now seem important that he should know why she had come. That scene in her room had by now happened so long ago that she could scarcely recall it. Only in the tumult of her brain there still whirled that senseless chorus as of idiot children dancing on the green, dancing round her in a nightmare, pointing their fingers at her, mopping and mowing.

Oh hangman stay your hand,  
Oh stay it for a while.

She stood before him, baffled, in some way cheated, as though this were not the man she had come to find.

His lips moved but no sound came from them, she wondered if he were praying. He was, but for strength, not to be virtuous, but to be wicked. So many hours he had sat watching that door, thinking, 'What if I should hear her step in the gallery coming towards me, what if I should see the door open and herself standing there?'

So he had luxuriated in his thought until at last he had brought this moment towards him by the sheer power it seemed of his will and imagination. And like some novice in the Black Art who has at last succeeded in raising the devil, he stood aghast at his wizardry,

terrified of its consequence. This moment, that he had resolved not to promote by any word or action, but that he had desired with a fervour capable of working a miracle, might well bring his ruin and hers.

But now it was here, and all that it might bring, inevitable. To look back and regret, to look forward and fear, was as useless as it was cowardly. All he could do now was to take the present moment for what it brought, but to his nature this was the most difficult thing that he could do, even though it brought the only woman he had ever desired with passion.

Where another man would have seen only her immediate presence offered to his arms, he remembered the rage of tenderness for her and hatred for her husband that had all but impelled him to descend from the pulpit and carry her off from him before the congregation. He cursed himself that he could not now feel as he did then, but must look before and after, fear the future and worst of all the present, lest he, for the first time a lover, should fail to please her, should make himself ridiculous and find her regarding him with that mocking, bird-like air. So he had sometimes seen her regard her husband. And to her consternation, he slid on to his knees, and encircling her with his arms, leaned his bowed head against her shivering body, saying in a strange voice like that of a sobbing child, 'In true love there should be no fear.'

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She did not know how to comfort him nor why she should have to do so, she had come to be comforted herself, it was she who wanted to crouch and sob, to be picked up by strong arms and made to feel that they would hold her safe for ever. She was not sure now that he had wanted her to come, she wished she had not come, she wished she had gone to Nurse instead. 'You had better go,' she said to herself, 'yes, you had much better go,' and again that queer, fluttering sense of freedom came upon her, for she was still her own, she had after all given her heart as yet to no man, and could keep it for her true lover whoever he might be. Yet her hurt vanity could not keep the disappointment out of her voice as she said,

'So you don't love me truly. Then I'll go,' and turned, her eyes smarting with angry tears, though still that strange lightness at her heart.

But his arms tightened round her, he raised his head, crying, 'Not love you?' and she looked again into his white and cavernous face. Then all power of volition seemed drawn out of her by his burning eyes, she stood as if enchanted; somewhere far away a small voice still repeated, 'You had better go,' but she could not move, that fluttering freedom had all died within her, and she was glad of it, her will was lost, swallowed up in a greater

She heard him say again, 'Not love you?' and then

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in a harsh and tearing voice, 'I am ravenous for you.' At the same instant he rose, lifting her with him, and she was lost in his embrace, 'lost for ever,' that small voice echoed far away, but she could scarcely hear it before the silence quenched it, the urgent and terrible silence of his love.

*Part*    **III**





### PART III

WHEN Ned Tarleton woke the next morning he found his bed very hard and himself very cold. He presently perceived that he was lying on the floor, but he could not think where. His head ached not merely from drink but from some blow he must have received, possibly in falling. He dragged himself up and to the windows, and pulled back the shutters. Here he saw the reason for his shivering plight. Winter, which had not come till late that year, had fallen in a single night. Frost had covered each pane so thick he could not see through it.

He looked back at the room in the encrusted light and saw that he had never been here before, nor could he remember how he had come to be here now. He stared at the unfamiliar bed-curtains of rough old tapestry, woven in some barbarous design of trees and stags, at a half-open door into a passage leading to nowhere that he could imagine. He turned again to the window and rubbed the frost from one of the panes until, in a miniature, diamond-shaped frame, he could see a small picture of an outside world, bleak, grey, and unfamiliar; of trees blown in an icy wind, their last leaves torn from them, hurrying distractedly from the

crazy skeletons that stretched their crooked fingers after them.

'Brrr!' shuddered Ned, blowing upon his own blue fingers. His ring was still there. At least he had not been robbed. Looking down on his satin coat he observed a recent wine stain and a remembered dissatisfaction stole upon him. That dress had not been suitable for a cock-fight in a barn. *That* was where he had been yesterday, at a cock-fight some miles off to which my lord had taken him and some others of their party. My lord's birds had come off victorious, and a great deal of money had changed hands and their loutish host had expressed his annoyance freely in many oaths of an expression and enunciation so rude and rural, Ned could scarcely understand him. He had however shown a cordial hospitality in pressing them all to stay to supper and with so steady a persistency that the others had had difficulty in making their escape.

Only Ned's insatiable curiosity as a rising young playwright had caused him to fall a victim, and here he was shivering in a bedroom where he had been too drunk to go to bed but fallen and cracked his head on the floor. The bed indeed presented an extraordinary disarray. It looked as though he must have had a pillow-fight with himself. Never had he known what it was to be as drunk as that.

He walked across to the half-open door, and stopped,

arrested in mid-stride by a remarkable spectacle. Across the back of a chair was spread a woman's dress, the sleeves hanging limply forward over the seat in an attitude that suggested a lifeless figure with a broken spine. Beneath the chair was a small pointed clog, kicked over to one side. He picked it up. It was fastened with a thong of scarlet leather. There were traces of mud on it that had been insufficiently cleaned. He began to look for its fellow, if he did not find it, he should carry off the solitary clog as a hostage, he did not know for what. There was a story he had heard told in France by Perrault, the Superintendent of the King's Buildings, of a prince who found a slipper, and by its means, his true princess, although she was disguised as a kitchen-maid, sitting among the cinders. But he had no excuse to take it, for he found what he could recognize as its fellow, though it was tied with a thong of green, not scarlet leather.

By now he had remembered something of the supper of the preceding night, a great deal of drink and noise and bragging, ending in some sort of tumult. Had there been a fight? It was as difficult to recall as a dream. And how had he got himself into a lady's room? He was sure that no woman had taken part in last night's proceedings, though there had been a good deal of the talk about them natural to such occasions. He fancied his host had spoken of them with the contempt and

irritation of one who seeks to enhance his manhood in a manner which Ned's superior wisdom and experience, in spite of his far fewer years, could now compare with that of a callow youth whose pimples have prevented the favour of the fair.

He went out into the passage and down a broad flight of stairs. The shutters were still closed and he felt his way with his hand on the banisters. At the bend there was a knob that had split in two, his finger was caught in it with a sharp pinch. As he pulled it out he was sure that he had done this before but with his left hand, not his right. It must have been as he came up the stair, and suddenly he remembered coming up in company with a crowd of others, stumbling and shouting and thrusting each other on, following some chase which had seemed at the time the most exquisite piece of merriment in the world. Had one of them run to hide, and the rest pursued? Country sports were childishly simple. Or perhaps they were all chasing a cat, or possibly a hare. Cats and hares were liable to change into witches when chased, perhaps that was why he now began to think there was some notion about a woman in connection with this drunken pursuit, but he could discover no more, nor could he make it connect with his night in a lady's chamber.

Downstairs, in a large, old-fashionedly sombre room, lined with oak, he found his company. A servant must

have pulled open a shutter, for the raw daylight lay across the middle of the scene and on the ashes of the dead fire. The air was foul. The slumbering figures in their stiff and cramped positions did not stir; where they sat, there they fell, where they fell, there they lay; not till the trump sounded on the Last Day would they stagger to their feet and stretch and yawn, complaining of the taste in their mouths. That in his own was none too pleasant. He shut the door on them to all eternity, and walked away through the silent and still darkened house, on tiptoe, without thinking why, until it occurred to him that it was well to go softly since at any moment he might discover the explanation of his lodging for the previous night and find it neither to his credit nor advantage.

He found his way to the kitchens, and here people were alive and stirring. There was a profusion of coarse food but considerable squalor. He could not face beer, and asked for water and some bread and butter from an old man who yammered at him with a loose-hung chin that was overgrown with tufts of hair like the tussocks of long grass on a sparse common.

He went out of doors where the frosty air surprised him afresh, as though he had been reborn since yesterday into a bleak and strange world.

The gardens he saw had been planned on a fine scale but had been much neglected and impoverished. In an

age which was busy with domestic improvements, this whole place seemed to have been asleep for at least a generation. In the cobbled yards he found a stable-boy to saddle his horse for him. He rode away down the drive between two rows of high and tossing trees. At the bend in the drive he looked back, for at this point it might happen that a female face of tender and entrancing beauty would look from one of the windows. But the house stood there square and solid with no sign of life, and the narrow dark windows looked back at him like blind eyes. 'That is a grim place,' he thought, 'I shall not come here again.'

Yet he rode away slowly as if reluctant, he wondered if he had omitted anything he should have done, so baffled did he feel and frustrated at leaving the house without wresting its secret from it. There were people there that he had not seen, and something had happened that he did not know, and yet he was concerned in it since he must have been the cause that the lady of the house had not slept in her room the previous night.

But a drunken frolic could not have entailed such consequences as to haunt his imagination with a sense of disaster. That surely was due to the material cause of strong beer and sherry sack, mulled and sweetened in the barbarous rustic fashion, perhaps also to the desolate aspect of the marshes and the snow-filled sky.

As he rode through the frosty silence of the marsh-

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land, through rising mists which hung about in shapes like shrouded figures, through a country which, by process of the sudden changes of our climate and also of his sour mood of alcoholic remorse, had in a single night been transformed into a foreign and forbidding land, it occurred to him to write a play such as no other playwright of his age had dared as yet attempt. For it would be a tragedy but not in blank verse, it would have no historical or legendary heroes in breastplates and plumed helmets, it would be of his own time, taking place in a simple country house not more than thirty miles from London, and not one of the characters should say a single fine or witty thing.

The play would hold the audience because they would be made to feel that their polite and merry company moving to and fro in comparatively safe streets where it was easy to get a linkboy to light you and a chair or coach to carry you, moving from park to playhouse or coffee-house where the talk was often as good as a play, from drawing-room to court ball or music party or impromptu supper, meeting their friends and greeting strangers as easily as their friends, that all this pleasant and easy-going civilization was closely surrounded by a wilderness of marsh and forest and bad roads which shut off its inhabitants at twice their actual distance from London, making of each isolated home a world so remote, so different from his



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own life, that he could scarcely even guess at its nature.

Some weeks ago at the beginning of his visit to Stoking he had found in the library a quantity of old plays, and among them a very simple crude tale of a woman who murdered her husband in some house in the country, and was condemned to be hanged together with her lover. This play was called *Arden of Feversham*, it was founded on a murder which had been notorious in its time. No one would now remember so stiff and old-fashioned a piece of work. Ned had been more amused by it than impressed. But it showed the writers of its day to be more adventurous than now. There was no enterprise in the theatre to-day, the most important part of a play should be its rhymed dedication to some wealthy dowager, and its only safe subject a witty comedy, all talk and no action, on the eternal theme of adultery.

‘We’ve grown so mighty clever,’ he thought, ‘that we are afraid to tell a story as it happened lest it should look too simple.’

Ned Tarleton had been born in exile after his parents had been married some years. They had followed the truant King Charles abroad when the English Court had been no more than a band of gipsies. Colonel Tarleton had been wounded in the leg, not very badly

it was thought at first, but the wound grew gradually worse under the treatment of the cheaper doctors in Paris, and he died just after Ned's eighth birthday.

He had to lie always on the couch, his back propped with pillows; his hands moved quickly, his expression was alert, his face made a patch of light in the dark mean room where they lodged. He found it increasingly hard to trim the pale reddish golden point of his beard as he would wish, and when Ned was still very small he would help him by holding up the heart-shaped mirror surmounted by cupids that had been a wedding present from the Venetian Ambassador at the English Court. The clipped hairs would fall on Ned's hands as fine and glistening as spun glass; he would blow on them and up they would fly in a little cloud. His father invested this performance with the grace and gaiety of a prince's levée. The slim, young-looking man on the couch seemed only to be waiting for his own whim to rise and dress with the elegance suitable to his rank and appearance and go out to play tennis, fence or dance. He would look into the mirror and then into the solemn face of his little son behind it, and laugh at two such dissimilar reflections of himself.

"Where would you choose to be if you were not here?" he asked, and Ned who had never been anywhere but in this room or one just like it, would wish that he were outside, playing with the ragged boys in the gutter.

They turned cart-wheels in front of the carriages in the hope of a coin, and yelled abuse after them if they did not get it, they made deadly catapults and practised them at a mark. Once he had seen a boy snatch fruit from a stall, dive through the crowd and shouting 'Stop Thief,' dart madly down a side street as if in pursuit of the culprit.

But his mother did not even like him to stay too long at the window, watching them. Her son should have suitable companions or none at all. His father would tell him of the pleasant times he had had when he was at school in Shrewsbury, how he and the other boys had swum in the river under the great lime-trees and lain in the grass to dry until they grew so hot in the sun that they would roll over and over down the steep banks until they fell splash into the water again, and old Hen-Legs as they called him, the oldest usher in the school, came grumbling up-stream to them saying they had disturbed his fishing. He had been kept on because he could impress the parents by telling them how he had taught Sir Philip Sidney and Fulk Greville; he would point to their two names in Latin in long spidery writing next each other in the school register, and say that it would be enough for him to have it inscribed on his tombstone that he had been their usher.

According to Colonel Tarleton, the world was full

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of pleasant company and gallant deeds, of young men who invented incomparably witty verses impromptu at their supper parties; of ladies extravagantly lovely who leaned from the windows at Hampton Court to watch the players in Tennis Court Lane so that the young men fell in love without one word spoken, hit their balls awry, and left the game to write a sonnet.

It was so he had first met his own wife, Katherine Stuart, a distant cousin to the King. She now looked much older than he, and too austere ever to have leaned from a window to admire a young man. Her resignation gave her none of the charm of her husband's slight-hearted courage, but a cool decorum which grew a little wooden as poverty, anxiety and hard work increased.

That warrior princess they called La Grande Mademoiselle, the greatest heiress in Europe, a beauty whom kings sought in marriage, had once professed the warmest friendship for her. For some years after they had met as children in a French convent, Mademoiselle de Montpensier had written to her dear wise Kate, her mentor, her conscience, her nobler self, begging her to forsake the tedious purposes of matrimony ordained by custom, and help form a kingdom that should combine pastoral solitude with an amiable company of both sexes, all entirely celibate, who would guard sheep on sunshiny days and pay visits

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from one hermitage to another in chairs, calashes and coaches, play the lute and harpsichord and read poetry.

Katherine's common sense divined that such childishness was not merely due to youth but to something impracticable in Mademoiselle's nature. She pointed out that people would always desire to marry at some time or other, that it was a waste of time to try and make them different, and that if the Princess did so she would find her life, which then promised so brilliantly, a grievous disappointment. The Princess's letters grew shorter, colder, then ceased.

The promise of Katherine's own youth, of her marriage to a charming lover, a poet, courtier and soldier, had now withered in poverty and illness. Her wisdom grew more worldly, she began to see that her common sense had fallen short, that it was she who had tried to make La Grande Mademoiselle different, and had lost a valuable ally.

'She has grown proud and unkind in her good fortune,' she said, and Colonel Tarleton compared his wife's friend to the Queen in Herodotus who was 'as high as a mountain and they hated her.'

'Who did?' asked Ned.

'King Louis for one. She fought against him in the Fronde and shot away her chance of marriage to him. But she would rather be called the modern Joan of Arc

than Queen of France. She is a fool but a fine fool. She will remember you in time, Kate.'

'In time to hang a wreath of coxcombs on my grave.'

'What does she mean?' thought Ned, but he did not ask her as he would have asked his father.

They had visitors from the English Court as impecunious as themselves, who were apt to be noisy, hearty, and intolerably hungry. The shabbier their clothes the more they swaggered; they boasted of the desperate and occasionally shameful means to which they were driven for a livelihood. A bold and obtuse young man who had drunk all the wine they had for that evening expressed his thanks by offering to teach Colonel Tarleton a sure method of cheating at cards. 'Tied by the leg as you are,' he said, 'it is about all you can do, and convenient, should you receive a challenge.'

The French Court either slighted them by treating them as the beggars they were, or impressed the fact on their notice with a superfluous flow of courtesy. Prince Rupert, who was a frequent caller at one time, described what he called the 'After you' ceremony which took place every time the Queen Mother and King of France insisted that the Queen Mother and King of England should precede them. It took a full half-hour, he swore, for the combined Royal Families to go through a doorway, for there they had to stand, bowing and curtsying and protesting

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while the courtiers concealed their yawns, and their knees cracked with weariness.

He had lately been cruising off Guinea and Barbadoes with a fleet of five ships, capturing the Spaniards' or Cromwell's vessels indiscriminately and selling their goods to Portugal at Madeira. But he had made very little money out of these dubious transactions and spoke gloomily of visiting his elder brother in the Palatinate unless he could raise funds for an expedition to discover the passage to the South Sea through the great lakes of Canada.

Ned leaned against the chair in which the Prince sat somewhat gingerly, for he was large and it was broken, and heard of foreigners who poisoned their arrows and devoured their prisoners, of heats insupportable, of rains intolerable, every drop of which was changed into a serpent as it touched the earth. But this buccaneer and soldier of fortune whose headlong audacity had caused the greatest successes and defeats of the Royalists in the Civil Wars, did not care to talk much of his various adventures, nor even to give all the reasons why some particular battle had gone against him. He refused to believe the world was nearing its end because he and his friends had been ruined in the wars, or even because the King his uncle had been beheaded, and 'a base mechanic fellow' usurped his kingdom.

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His handsome, obstinate face was quickened to life only when he spoke of the inventions of this learned and inquisitive age. He had himself improved gunpowder to ten times its former strength, and prophesied that war material would become infinitely more destructive than it was even to-day. He had learnt a marvellous new art of mezzotint engraving from a German artist and now tried to teach it to Colonel Tarleton but in vain, for the slender hands of the invalid could not approach his sure and delicate performance. All the time his great fingers moved among the intricate tools, he hummed happily the fragments of tunes he could not remember or talked of a world he would not live to see. For new worlds were every day being discovered in this old world that lay familiar to their eyes and hands. At last men had begun to inquire into natural phenomena instead of breaking their wits on the eternally vexed questions of religion and verbal philosophy. What more practical service than this could a man render his kind? And yet these fantastic fools of France, who held it the highest human honour to sit on a hard stool, looked on their ambitions as the visions of madmen and reproached him and his fellows for being men of another world, only fit companions for shadows and their own melancholy whimsies.

He had put away his engraving-tools. His heavy eyes dropped in languor, too much oppressed with the folly



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of mankind to peer any further into natural phenomena; then suddenly they opened full on Ned who stood attentive only for this moment. He held out a little box.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I have shed another glass tear for you to break. Next time I will bring you one of Job’s tears.’

‘How should they be still in the world?’

‘They crystallized so that anodyne necklaces are made of them.’

Ned asked no more of Job’s tears for he had opened the box and inside it, enclosed in soft wrappings, lay a bubble of cooled glass tapering to a long tail. Very tenderly the Prince laid it on Ned’s hand.

‘Indeed it is like a tear,’ said his mother, ‘or like a long pearl if pearls were transparent.’

The Prince did not answer. He was accustomed to women who gushed over his experiments and he considered they had no real aptitude for them. Ned was also silent, his hand rigid, his breath suspended lest he should blow his treasure from it. For one moment it was his, the next, he scratched the tail with a pin and instantly the whole exploded into minute fragments. The air glistened with them, they lay on his hand like the hairs clipped from his father’s beard, they blew away, they were gone. The exquisite moment was over, he struggled to keep himself from bursting into tears.

Prince Rupert’s voice filled the room with a majestic

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sound. 'We have discovered,' he said, 'that all things are ordered in Nature by motion. But it may be as a young Oxford scholar has prophesied, that our followers some ages hence will divide this doctrine into as many distinctions as the schoolmen did that of matter and form; and so the whole life of it will vanish away, as theirs has already done, and as this crystal drop that I have made has this moment passed into division and vain air.'

When the Prince left Paris, Ned set himself to learn French and Spanish from his father, for he had been promised a regiment as soon as he could write a letter in ten different languages to ask for it.

'A regiment of ghosts,' said the clear yet desolate voice of his mother, 'that indeed he might be able to muster.'

It was in one of Rupert's rash charges that her husband had received his wound, and for this, although she knew it to be unreasonable, she held the Prince responsible.

When her husband died, she did not speak so bitterly, for often she had only done so in unconscious appeal to him to contradict her with his sweetness of temper. Now she had to supply it herself, or despair.

The emptiest year of Ned's life followed his father's death. With obstinate patience his mother continued the lessons he had given him, but all Ned could after-

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wards remember of them were the holes in the rickety wooden floor which he tried to form into some geometrical pattern all the time his mother's voice went on above his head, dropping slow, dull words into the dark room.

When she took him out, he had to run to keep up with her, his hand firmly clasped in hers. She hated to walk through the vile streets of Paris unattended except by her little son who had only her to protect him. A helpless indignation would mingle with her grief and she would throw her long black veil over her face so that Ned should not see that she was crying. But Ned saw it and wondered why his mother cried only when she had a veil over her face. He would drag back to stare after some swaggering musketeer, or a ragged bear ambling along at the end of a pole, or an old woman that he thought was a witch; but if he called out to his mother to look too, she only held his hand the tighter and hurried as if pursued. 'It is not right, not right,' he heard her sob beneath her veil.

There were fewer visitors now, but one began to come more often, a portly Italian who talked in tones of majestic sorrow which would melt towards the end of his visit into a comfortable complacency. He and Ned disliked each other, yet Ned was glad when he came because he was then allowed to remain undisturbed at the window. But he could not make up

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stories about the people he saw there as he had done with his father when they had taken it in turns to describe their possible adventures. His head now seemed as empty as the room. There was nothing he could bring out of it for his own pleasure since it was for his alone.

He began to count the nails on the floor, the buttons on his mother's dress, to invent a magic of his own regarding them. If with his eyes tight shut he touched the third button from the top, he would fall into the Seine and be drowned; but if he touched the third nail from the latch he would become King of France and England. If he stared long enough at the door, wishing as hard as he could, and then shut his eyes, he might open them to find that the nails had resolved themselves into the same pattern as the holes in the floor, and once this harmony had been achieved he would turn round to see that his father was again lying on the couch.

His mother tried to correct him of these new odd tricks of staring and then shutting his eyes, of touching things, of moving his lips as though he muttered to himself, but he became sullen and difficult, and her elderly suitor could only suggest that what was needed was manly discipline. She conquered her pride and wrote again to Mademoiselle de Montpensier.

For three days she thought out and re-wrote her

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letter, trying to make a bridge between her own practical and chastened mind and that of the spoilt and fantastic royal beauty. At first she wrote in the high-flown style of Mademoiselle's own letters, adapted from the romances that had once been so fashionable at the Court of Louis XIII. She explained all the circumstances that had led to her unfortunate criticism of Mademoiselle's noble ideals, 'too noble only as I feared for a world through which you voyage as a stranger, the princess of another world.' She wondered where she had found the phrase, so nonsensical did it seem and yet it had a sanction, she could not think whose.

Then she remembered Prince Rupert sitting in their treacherous chair which he had mended himself. Her family she thought were certain to fail in anything they undertook whether it were in mending a chair or in keeping a kingdom, commanding a pirate fleet or writing for help. Her cousin could make glass drops for little boys to break; it might be that this brittle triumph would prove his most substantial achievement.

She was an intelligent woman and through her scorn she felt some awe of what she did not know. She wished there were anything she now cared about as much as Prince Rupert cared about his drops, and looking at her letter she felt disgust at having written anything so unlike her true mind. She tore it up and in five

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minutes scrawled an account of what had happened to her in the last few years; she would now marry again and go into Italy with her husband if she knew what to do with her son. 'Perhaps you would help me,' she ended, and signed her name.

Two days later Ned heard horsemen riding slowly down their street, he looked out and saw three men in livery looking this way and that, and with them a tall lady in a green velvet dress laced with silver, and a high crowned riding-hat surmounted with plumes. Nobody like that had ever ridden down their street. She stopped at their door, there was a pause for inquiries, then he heard her coming up the uneven wooden stair, she stooped through the doorway and stood there staring, and Ned thought 'That is the Princess.' Her eyes did not look like a Princess's but like an overgrown school-girl's, adventurous yet frightened. So she stood for an instant and for ever in his after vision of her, then moved in a little rush upon his mother, and the two ladies clung together and cried and laughed and talked a great deal, and out of all the exclamations and speeches and protestations, Ned perceived that though neither believed much of what the other said, their intentions were kindly and mainly directed towards him.

He rode away on the saddle-bow of one of her servants to lead a Court life, at first in Mademoiselle's

household in training as a page and then with King Louis.

King Charles's restoration to his kingdom made no immediate difference to him. He had never seen England and was fast ceasing to think of it as his country. Only his father's tales of school at Shrewsbury connected him with it, and on summer days he longed to tear off his stiff and complicated clothes and bathe with other boys in a river under over-hanging lime-trees.

He grew to speak French as easily as English and could plume himself when Mademoiselle told him how clumsily that perfect gallant King Charles had wooed her at first because he spoke French so badly. She had written her memoirs for the purpose of recording all the compliments she had received, and delighted to read to the little boy how his King had once held the flambeau before her mirror, while the Queen Mother Henrietta Maria dressed her hair for the ball with jewels from the crown of France and those of England which she had not yet sold.

'But I thought nothing of him, nor of the King of France, both seated at my feet,' she said, 'for I was considering whether or no I should marry the Emperor.'

But now she declared she would never marry for she had discovered no man like her father. He had

spoilt her, he had been dependent on her for money for she inherited her vast wealth from her mother, he had always been indisposed if a battle or a decision were required of him. But he could talk better than anyone, and 'good conversation is the best thing in the world,' she insisted so fiercely that Ned was conscience-stricken at having so long remained silent although he had had no chance to do anything else.

When he left her household for the Palace of the Louvre she gave him a ring with an intaglio picture of a shrewd and homely face much enclosed in a beard. It was that of her grandfather, the great Henry of Navarre whose famous white plume she still wore, battered and rankish as it now was, among the magnificent feathers in her hat.

'You too must preserve your panache,' she said; and the child of a newer age privately hoped he could do so without wearing an old feather.

But he came to miss her stories, her readings from pastoral or heroic romances and plays, when she would march up and down the room, declaiming Corneille's verses with emphatic yet stiff gestures, stamping her foot like a charger, while the shadow of her nose bobbed up and down against the gilded Spanish leather on the wall. It was a nose that had grown too pronounced for beauty, a Bourbon nose, egoistic, grandiose, absurd, the nose of a heroic Princess who had not kept



up with the times, inexperienced and beginning to be elderly.

In King Louis's Court he found that Corneille's plays were out of date, so were heroics, so was *Made-moiselle*. She was eleven years older than the King her cousin and eleven years behind her age.

In King Louis's Court moreover the last link with his parents was severed; their poverty, his father's illness, his mother's austerity, were realities that he exchanged, so it seemed long after, for a dream. His first experience of it was in the actual scene of dreams he had had as a hungry child. He found himself in what everyone was calling the Enchanted Grove; artificial hills were raised with caves full of cold meats and ham, and tiers upon tiers of goblets of sherbet, wine and brandy; a small castle had been built of almond paste and a rock of caramel; the trees were covered with preserved fruits tied to the branches with ribbons.

A lady's voice asked him why he did not eat, and he looked up with his hands full of sugar-plums to see a pair of light-coloured twinkling eyes peering down at him through a black mask.

'I was wishing, Madame, that I were as hungry as I used to be.'

'That tells me you are English too,' she said.

He saw her again that evening in the ballet. She

wore a Hungarian dress studded with jewels, and danced with King Louis who took half a dozen different parts. Ned was too much dazed by the thunderous applause that greeted each entrance of the King, the blaze of candles and torches, the fantastic costumes and suits of gold and silver armour, to have stage-fright in his own small part as an attendant cupid. But afterwards as he wandered about the gardens he felt lost and homesick; the scent of the tuberose and jasmine was almost overpowering; from time to time the night was ablaze with fireworks and giant figures of flame stood half across the sky. He pretended that he was back in the garret and that his father was describing the scene to him in some story of the Sultan; he would shut his eyes and wish he were there; and now he had opened them and there he was, but not his father.

Then he remembered that soon he was to see the first elephant and camel in the King's menagerie, and felt more cheerful. They were released from it to take part in an allegorical procession of the Centuries and Seasons, dancing fauns, bacchantes, shepherds and shepherdesses and lastly the god Pan, represented by an actor called Molière, who after the pageant acted with his troupe of comedians in pieces of his own composition.

The lady who had danced in a Hungarian dress in Ned's first ballet was the English Princess, Madame

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Henriette. She was King Charles II's youngest sister and had married Monsieur, King Louis's little brother. Little he would always remain, an absurd creature balanced on high heels, stuck all over with ribbons, rosettes and jewels, as vain of his complexion as an elderly beauty, and jealous of his wife, not as a possession but a rival to his own charms. He once succeeded in tricking the Prince de Condé into a position where he could not avoid, as next in rank, the service of handing him his shirt, and thus established his superiority to the greatest soldier of the age.

She loved King Louis, who loved her, but too late. The two Queen Mothers had desired their match in their childhood, but he had married the Infanta of Spain, for State reasons only, in a splendid palace on an island reared specially and solely for that occasion. Only then did he begin to observe how Henriette had grown in gaiety and assurance, how her face, which like all her family had been thought too long and melancholy in shape, was now piquantly lovely between her fashionable pouffes of hair, frizzed up to her ears. The poor relation who had been dependent on his charity was now fitted to do even him credit.

'How marriage has improved that dull little girl,' said the married women.

She had become the bright centre of every ball, masque and fête. King Louis went for long rides with

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her in the forest of Saint Germain's at night. Both the Queen Mothers were scandalized, and she of England said it was all because Monsieur had refused to leave his young wife in her mother's care. Monsieur raged and fretted, then grew so silent that he only spoke about as much as two or three women.

'We must be more careful,' said the culprits.

'Honour and duty,' said the Princess from England.

'Circumspection,' said the King of France; and they rode again in the forest to discuss how cautious they must be.

Ned heard the gossip and wished he were a man such as Madame could love. He had grown very tall since coming to the French Court, and had already fallen in love with a kind and jolly chambermaid and with a lively child who had to enter a convent at the age of twelve because she had no dot.

One evening he supped with a hunting party in a grove in the forest. The King and the Princess had not joined them but nobody was so indiscreet as to mention it. The Court musician, Lulli, conducted a small band hidden among the bushes, an Italian boy sang a love song to a guitar. Some couple that had been sitting near Ned, the gallant comparing the lady to each known goddess, the lady parrying each compliment with a disclaimer, fell silent, rose, and wandered away into the forest.

When the party began to go home, Ned did not wish to accompany them; he lagged behind and presently let his pony come to a standstill over a particularly good patch of grass. He let the reins lie idle, watching the leaves that stood quite still in small black silhouettes against the pearl-coloured sky. He knew that he was waiting for something to happen.

It was said that the King had once seen a phantom in this forest, but would never tell what exactly he had seen.

And once when a company of gentlemen had allowed Ned to go with them on a hawking expedition, they had got lost and wandered for miles through the dark confused shapes of the trees until at last they saw a light and came to a fine house, though near no road, and closely surrounded by the forest. So that they were surprised when in answer to their knocking the door was opened by servants in elegant livery, and a man of noble appearance came forward and greeted them as welcome guests for the night.

They introduced themselves to him but he did not mention his name. He entertained them with excellent food and wines and the best company of all, which is that of audience, for he delighted in hearing all they could tell him of the gossip of the Court. When they asked why he himself did not attend it, he replied that it was not at present convenient. A gay and impulsive

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young man called Vervins exclaimed that they would tell the King of his magnificent hospitality and that the result would certainly mean a summons to the Palace.

‘If you would do me a service,’ replied his host, ‘you will none of you mention me, or that you have rested in my poor house this night.’

They promised with that degree of embarrassment naturally conferred by any mystery, and their host, rising, took a flambeau from the wall and lighted them to their rooms, where there were sufficient beds to accommodate them all though in no case did more than two share a bed. Ned had been too much excited and impressed to sleep; he heard the trees whispering and sighing all round the house. When at last he fell asleep his companion woke him for he said he was groaning and muttering. Ned was glad that he was not yet old enough to have a mistress lest he should babble in her arms while asleep of this night’s adventure.

‘Which of us will be the one to tell?’ he asked himself, for by now his troubled fancy had convinced him that this would happen.

It was Vervins, who told his mistress, not in his sleep but to defend himself against her jealous questions as to his disappearance that night. She swore secrecy, and the story soon reached the King, who looked thoughtful and displeased. It was discovered that the

man was Fargues who had formerly worked against the Court and Mazarin, and had long retired from public life in consequence. The King was irritated that his former opponent should all this time have been living so near him and in such prosperity; the charge of an old murder was trumped up against him, and all the efforts of his grateful guests could not save him from being executed.

'That was an expensive dinner,' said one of them. 'At least let us thank God it was put down on the wrong bill.'

As Ned now waited in the forest, he thought that the apparition that the King had seen must have been that of Fargues's stately ghost.

A sound no more than a sigh broke the suspense. 'Ah,' he thought, 'here it comes.' It came nearer, the quick thudding of horse's hoofs, the swish of leaves, sudden irregular sounds as though the rider had lost control of his mount and were crashing at random through the undergrowth. A lady on a white pony came through the bushes into the clearing. Ned had sprung from the saddle and now caught at her bridle, steadying the startled horse. Not till he had done this did he see that it was Madame Henriette. She looked down on him and said a little breathlessly, 'Something frightened him, I don't know what.'

He could think of nothing to say. He felt his face

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growing crimson, he said to himself, 'Speak, you fool, can't you? What does it matter what you say? She won't remember it for more than a minute.'

He said, 'They say the forest is haunted. Perhaps that was why.'

He need not have troubled as to what he said, for she did not even hear him. Her eyes were startled and distressed. She said, 'I shall wait here a moment.'

He helped her dismount, she sat on the grass, took off her hat and puffed up her hair which had fallen loose. He hung the ponies' bridles on two branches.

'You may sit,' she said with a quick, desperate laugh, 'there is no order as to stools in the forest.'

He knelt in the grass before her, sitting back on his heels. In the deeper dusk under the trees her face made him think of the moon. It seemed to have been severed from her fashionable riding-habit, for that was of dark green and had sunk into the background of leaves and grass except where here and there a jewel on it glittered at him like a detached and winking eye. Last night he had seen her dancing in a dress of white, black and carnation taffetas; hundreds of candles had shone on her, hundreds of eyes had gazed at her. Her behaviour had been as brilliant a piece of artifice as her dress, she had sparkled, shown interest, been respectful but a shade mocking, light-hearted and grave all in due turn.

Her now serene and moon-like face had nothing



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to do with all this. It was severed from herself as from her dress, an apparition of this enchanted forest that would haunt his memory always.

She did not turn her head, and her eyes were shadows in the half-darkness, but he knew that she was now looking at him. When she spoke, her voice was no longer agitated.

‘What do you think of as you kneel there? You stand so still and watch us all,—what do you see?’

Now again he had to speak and knew that his thoughts would not help him. He could not say, ‘I shall remember you all my life,’ or ‘You have noticed me among all the rest.’ It was the price he had to pay for his early training in compliments that now when he meant them he could not say them. He said what he was not thinking of and did not believe, for it was inconceivable that anyone should harm her: ‘It is dangerous, Madame, for you to ride alone in the forest.’

Her face suddenly became part of her again. It flashed into life together with her outflung hands and hurried voice. ‘But I was not alone. I was with King Louis and we quarrelled. Do you think he would sacrifice his dignity so far as to ride after me? He would rather let me be robbed, raped, murdered. Oh, I am miserable and whoever I tell will scold me, or laugh at me which is worse. I will tell Molière the actor so

that he may make a comedy out of it and then everyone will laugh, even myself.'

'No. Tell me, Madame.'

'Why. Will you make a comedy of it?'

'Or a tragedy.'

'It is more difficult for a tragic poet to have good manners. Monsieur Racine is of good family and has none of the air of a poet, but Louis complains that he is sometimes absent-minded. Will you really write a tragedy for me, little poet? But there is no material for it. It is true my father was beheaded, but I have always had an amusing life, even when I had to wait on the good nuns at Chaillot. They used to flutter round me like pigeons when my mother dressed me for a Court ball. Do you know what King Louis said then when his mother told him to dance with me? He said, "Madame, I do not like little girls."

'Of course I was a fright. I had to wear other people's dresses and I was as shy as an owl in daylight, and so thin that the King mocked his brother for marrying the bones of the Innocents. But how I have teased him with it since!'

She had taken an exquisite pleasure in reminding the infatuated King how he had once scorned her. 'But now it is no longer funny,' she sighed, for the King was no longer infatuated.

And plucking the long grasses round her very fast

and throwing them away as fast as she plucked them, she told Ned how she and King Louis had agreed that as their respective mothers were so tiresome, so ridiculously old-fashioned, so unaware how utterly all manners and customs and above all the young people themselves had changed since their day; that she and King Louis—that she and King Louis—well, they had agreed that though there was no reason nor sense in these maternal suspicions and objections, yet it might be as well to throw them off the scent by arranging that King Louis should pay court to one of her maids of honour, purely as a blind to his cousinly admiration for herself.

And now the farce had become reality, and it was Madame who found Louis was using his cousinly admiration as a blind for his passion for that tender, timid creature, her maid of honour, Louise de la Vallière.

‘And I who begged him not to choose her, lest she should be hurt, when all the time it was I who was to be hurt.’

‘She too will be hurt, Madame.’

‘You are so young you can still be wise. Wait till you are in love yourself, then you will believe that love lasts for ever. I wish it did not last so long. I wish I could love someone else. I wonder if I really love Louis or only the Apollo I see in the ballets. You

know I think he begins to believe he really is the Sun God. He is so proud. He hates the common people because they marched through his bedroom when he was a child. They had gone mad as the Parisians do, they were storming at the Palace gates, swearing that Mazarin had smuggled him away. Then the Queen mother made one of her gestures.

“‘The Kings of France,’” she said, “have nothing to fear from the people of Paris. Let them enter and see for themselves that the King is sleeping peacefully without thought of escape.” So for four hours the filthy stinking rabble filed through his bedroom while he had to lie quite still, pretending to be asleep. He lay there hating them, and all the time he vowed that he would build great palaces away from Paris and the mob, that he would make islands rise out of a lake, and hills from a plain, and waters flow in a dry desert.

‘He is arrogant, he is often cruel—Monsieur has told me of the fights they had as boys and even when it was a pillow fight, for fun, it would end in blows and scratches—but it is true there is something god-like in his pride, at least I have always thought so, but to-night I did not. I wish I could always think so. Why can we not remain the same for ever?’

At last she had stopped her nervous plucking of the grasses, she looked up and at him, and presently she said in quite a different voice, calm and even happy,

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'I remember now when it was that I spoke to you before. You stood with your hands full of sugar-plums and did not eat them. How tall you have grown, and it was such a little time ago.'

'No, Madame, so long ago.'

But she would never think of him except as a child with sweetmeats. It was not fair.

He planned to go away, to come back full grown and in disguise to make love to her in a forest grove. She would wonder where they had met before, but he would never tell her, he would tease her with stories from the scholars of their meetings in past ages or in Plato's heaven. So well assured and experienced he would be by then that he would seem the older. 'I am older than her now,' he thought as he watched the flickering expressions that passed across her face, and in a sudden bold determination he spoke his thought aloud.

She stared a second, then said lightly, 'But if you were older still, you would realize that it takes years of practice to be as young as I.'

He felt that she had drawn back from him, that she might be as indiscreet and wild as she would, but that he must not swerve by a hair's breadth from his impersonal reserve. For an instant he felt the injustice of it, then recognized that it was by virtue of his youth and apparent imperturbability that she permitted herself such freedom. She would not talk so to Molière, for

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all the lively sympathy expressed in that charming countenance, if she sketched him her own story for a play.

Suddenly he longed to make that play himself; he alone had the right to do it, for to him alone had she talked like this; he alone knew her and therefore alone loved her truly. He no longer heeded her words, for she had begun to chatter merely as she would to a thousand others, of other people, and in pursuit of that trivial and unimportant subject, age. 'Look at our darling de Sevigné,' she was saying, 'she is a thousand times more childish and impulsive than her daughter. And she too loves the forests. Do you not love them? When I hear a horn sound in the forest it is as though it were a summons to me alone. Do you fancy that too?'

He heard her now. She was speaking to him again. He answered at random out of his wandering thoughts. 'You ride a white horse.'

'And so does death. Is that what you mean? That that will be the summons?'

'Madame, indeed I did not. I do not know why I said it. Oh, Madame, death could not touch you.'

His voice trembled and broke. He bowed his head to hide his face. For an instant they were both still. Then she leaned forward and kissed his cheek. He felt that she had laid a spell on him.

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After that he knew why it was he watched people, why the things they said stuck in his mind. He had often found he was repeating to himself casual phrases he had heard or thought of, such as 'a tall old witch who walks like an ostrich,' or 'Cardinals are eminent criminals,' or 'What we can do to repent is to make our servants fast.'

He knew now that what he wanted to do with all the words and scenes and faces that crowded his mind was to write a play for Madame, not a Court comedy, but a ballet and opera in one that should make his mistress a figure of more than mortal beauty. Its characters included Death and the Devil, the soul of a long dead Pope, and a statue who should come to life in the last act. He wrote one or two songs for it and a few speeches some twenty to thirty lines in length. Then he found that though he could speak French fluently he could not write it sufficiently correctly for the strict canons of French verse. For the first eight years of his life he had talked English only, and had learned to write it with his father.

With that he discovered also that though people liked him and confided in him, he often felt very lonely here, and that he had not spoken with Madame since their meeting in the forest. If he were to go away and become a man fit to serve her, whom she would no longer recognize as a child, he must do so quickly.

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It was at last arranged that he should go to London, and through Madame's influence. It seemed odd to him that when at last he spoke with her it was to ask her to help him leave her, and not tell her why. But she commended him for wishing to see his own country and declared that some small post could easily be found for him at Court, for her brother Charles would refuse her nothing.

'He writes me the most enchanting letters,' she said, 'it is a thousand pities that Monsieur does not love him better. But what can you expect? No man under five feet will love a man above two yards high.'

With a predetermined impulsiveness and candour she hid her real thoughts from him, and he could catch no glimpse of the face that he had once seen floating detached and dreamlike in the forest.

He went to England and was happier than he had ever been. He was astonished at the freedom everywhere. A learned divine could write that the principles of the new scientific philosophy were of more importance to mankind than those of religion. People spoke to King Charles as to a fellow mortal and a good fellow at that. They cracked jokes at his expense to his face, and his mistresses took astounding liberties with him. He was always out of pocket and frequently complained that he had not enough stockings and cravats of his own,



and had to have recourse to his wife's while his were at the wash. Nobody now troubled to keep up appearances; the wars and the travels had altered all that, and manners were rougher and gayer than he had imagined possible in a Court.

Now, looking back, he could see how fear ruled that artificial world of Louis. The mob that had filed through his palace was still there outside it, crying of starvation and revolution. The ornamental waters of his new palace were dug at the expense of cartloads of dead workmen who had succumbed to the unhealthy marshes they were draining.

The ladies showed superior culture and refinement to those of Whitehall, but their gossip though less open was more deadly. There were always whispers of poison and incest; the convents were said to be riddled with witchcraft, since those who were forced to dedicate themselves to God for no other reason than that they could not secure a man, were apt to relieve the maddening tedium of their lives by devoting themselves to the devil. Nor was such worship confined to the religious orders. It was reputed that half the Court consulted a witch who had slaughtered as many as two thousand infants as a necessary preparation for her practices, that Madame de Montespan had had the Black Mass performed on her body in order to gain the love of the King, and was now piercing pigeons' hearts in the

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hope of dispatching her rival, the tender timid La Vallière who had to act as her friend.

These horrors or rumours of horror Ned had accepted at the time as a child accepts most conditions of his life. Now the vision of fairyland that he had first seen in a grove where the rocks were made of caramel, took on the quality of a nightmare in his mind. King Charles, for all the lies and subterfuges with which he tried to evade his difficulties, political and amorous, did not deceive himself, imagine himself a god, nor wish to be.

He could now perceive something terrible as well as ridiculous in divine majesty supported on heels six inches high to conceal King Louis's low stature, in the tight-lipped smile that covered his bad teeth, in the precise courtesy with which he bowed to every female in exact accordance with her rank, and the barbarity that forced his mistresses to ride with him on his long journeys over atrocious roads when they were so far gone with child that the courtiers held bets as to whether they would be delivered before they reached the end.

For all the magnificence of the French Court, he felt himself in a more modern world when he heard the sound of mechanical and scientific instruments within the very palace of Whitehall.

In that rabbit warren of tiny and inconvenient rooms he met again with his old friend Prince Rupert, grown more morose and absent-minded and so deeply attached

to his laboratory that if the King disturbed him by lounging and chatting there too long, he would throw some horrible chemical on the furnace to smoke him out.

'He's half a German, and they are all foggy,' said his royal cousin as he rushed cursing and half choked from 'the alchemist's hell.'

The Prince introduced Ned to the Royal Society, and would talk of nothing at the first discussion Ned attended but a scheme for the making of wine out of sugar-cane from Barbadoes, a project that struck the youth as inadequate to the aims of a society that claimed to have discovered the key to the universe.

He was at this time divided between his ambitions to study the stars in Saint James's Park, to find out how to make machines with wings for men to fly, and to earn the reward promised by the King to whomsoever should discover the Meridian. Older men noticed him with interest, and Mr. Evelyn took him on an expedition in a very light flying chariot drawn by six horses at the break-neck speed demanded by this modern fashion of driving, to see a learned doctor at Norwich who had lately been knighted. His whole house and garden were a cabinet of rarities, of medals, books, plants, eggs and the curiosities of nature.

This gentleman, Ned was told, spent his life in inquiry into the secrets of light and darkness, of God,

of treasures buried by the ancients, of women who gave their husbands just cause for divorce by turning into men in a single night. So removed did he appear from the business of the world that when Mr. Evelyn complimented him as the most notable worthy to come out of this town, Ned could not help remarking, 'But not to come to it, unless indeed, as I suspect, Sir Thomas is himself that "man in the moon who came down too soon and found his way to Norwich." '

Mr. Evelyn looked annoyed at such childish folly from his protégé, but the doctor turned his mild gaze on Ned with the generous wonder with which he was wont to survey the universe.

'Do you too plan to ride the Elephant in the Moon?' he asked.

'I must doubt it,' answered the young man, 'for I have no idea where I am going.'

'I am as loyal as any man,' said the doctor, 'yet I would remind you of a saying of the late Lord Protector, that you never go so far as when you do not know where you are going.'

Madame Henriette came at last to England, and the whole Court moved to Dover to meet their King's youngest sister. There were rumours of high affairs of State discussed down there by the sea, complaints that Madame had come on a secret mission from King Louis to buy over King Charles as a pensioner of

France and the Pope. But no one would have thought so who had seen her laughing and romping like a child with her brother so that he declared no other woman had ever entertained him half as well.

Ned had caught her up in age as he had promised himself, for there was little difference now to be noticed between the tall young man, quiet and self-contained in manner, and the thin slight young woman with her changeable face. But she took very little notice of him. She may have thought it wiser to do so, for she had had many troubles caused by scandal and by imprudent and inconsiderate admirers. Her redoubtable mother-in-law told her she believed in her innocence but that she was too apt to be soft and languishing in manner, to show her heart too readily and tempt others to show her theirs. 'You will find it an excellent rule in life,' she said, 'never to be intimate with anybody.'

Therefore the Princess, who had been unguarded with vain and arrogant fools, was needlessly cautious with Ned, to whom she would have liked to speak as once she had done in the forest of Saint Germain. He was coxcomb enough to resent her manner and not coxcomb enough to guess its motive. He had grown popular with women and his recent successes had begun to spoil him. In pique he transferred his admiration to a cockney actress lately promoted to the King's bed,

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who was 'the maddest thing ever seen in a Court,' so a bishop declared and not wholly in displeasure.

Madame went back to France, and the next news of her was that of her death. She was delicate, she had complained of a pain in her side, La Grande Mademoiselle had said she saw death painted on her face; against the advice of her physicians she had bathed as usual in the river, then she had drunk a glass of chicory water, was seized with a paroxysm of pain, and soon after died. Monsieur her husband had always been jealous of her, and it was believed he had contrived her death by poison. The belief gave rage to the general grief.

Little as they had seen of her, the London populace adored her; there were no more whispers of plots and Papists, they remembered only that she was a Princess and twenty-six years old, that her father had been King of England and had died on the scaffold, that she was lovely, and loved by all who knew her, except her husband, a spiteful dandified French frog who had dared to murder an English Princess. They marched through the streets shouting their fury, they demanded war with France and tried to attack the French Ambassador. The two Courts and their Kings were desolate. Even Louis's belief in the icy reserve of majesty could not conceal his tears.

'Never,' said a narrow-shouldered young man with

half-shut eyes, who lounged against a chimneypiece in Whitehall, 'Never was anyone so regretted since dying was the fashion.'

In his most dangerous sallies Lord Rochester would draw himself up as now and dart his head a little forward like a serpent striking. But even his wit had not struck at Madame Henriette.

Ned discovered anew that no other woman could compare with her; he reproached himself for having imagined he could ever love another, but worst of all that he had expected as his right any further reward from her who had once opened her heart to him.

He grew so sad and restless that he lost several of his friends. Women showed an inquisitive sympathy which increased his new antipathy, for he liked them best wild and lively.

His mother had to pay a visit to England at this time to inquire into her estates. She seemed very little altered, she was perhaps even more reserved. But she must have guessed the cause of his sorrow for once she said to him, 'You have your love safe now for ever. Only the dead are that.' He knew that she was thinking of his father, that she was more unhappy than when she had been a widow. He became aware of death as a force ever present in life.

He remembered his promise to the Princess that he would write a tragedy for her, and now surely, if ever,

he could do it. He saw her as a spirit of air and fire, doomed for all her brightness. Yet still the play would not come to his mind. He did not want to write about the Court of King Louis; it now seemed too unreal and glittering, like his gold armour, made only to dance in, emblazoned with a motto which in France had seemed superb, but in England absurd. 'She could not have loved him,' he told himself.

But he had little time to consider past things. People were of irritating importance in his world, where it was as essential for the men as for the women to please. Some must dance well, some play the guitar and sing, all should show wit, and none a serious or spotty face. Yet such was the difficult contradiction that effeminacy was still held contemptible. The future Duke of Marlborough's only claim to present fame was his complexion; and the care with which he guarded it led those in power to refuse him a regiment since it was certain he would never make a soldier.

Ned's expression caused him more trouble than his skin; he had been warned that he sometimes looked absent, vacant, a moon-calf, and occasionally even downright solemn. For that reason he smiled whenever he could remember to do so, a smile that was singularly sweet and pensive because aloof from his thoughts.



His observation was more mature than that of his immediate contemporaries, but his achievement less. They were apt to make their triumphs at an early age, whereas he had not yet done anything remarkable. This at times distressed him and urged him to headlong efforts which failed to satisfy him. At others he seemed to himself to be waiting for something to happen, as he had done in the forest of Saint Germain, and thought that not till then would he know what it was he really wanted to do.

He did not become learned but he remained inquisitive. It was this instinct of exploration that led him at a country house party of several weeks' duration to accept an invitation from a barbarous specimen of country squire and stay to supper at Cricketts while the rest of his company rode back to Stoking without him.

It was pleasant to see again the sheltered groves of Stoking, to think that now he would be among his friends and making them laugh with his absurd adventure. Here he was wrong. He could find nobody to attend to him, he had hardly found a groom to take his horse, for the servants were flurried and excited, and his friends either ignored him or called to him as they hurried past as to someone they had all but forgotten.

‘So there is Ned again!’

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‘What has happened to you all these many years?’ but with no pause for answer.

They were directing their servants, collecting their possessions, in the midst of preparations for a hasty departure, but to all his questions they only exclaimed, ‘Can you not have heard? Oh but there is no time to tell it now. And look at the sky. That should show you why we must leave as soon as we can lest a fall of snow should catch us fast in this desert.’

They rustled round him, bustled off, laughing about something which they declared was far too old and stale to tell him now. He might indeed have been away for years.

He went into the drawing-room. Here at least nothing was changed, since there was the usual little crowd round the basset table where the Mazarin sat, constant to one thing only. Soon she would be trying her luck at Court as so many other foreign adventures had done. Her reputation abroad was of a kind to disconcert her future rivals more deeply than any of these. At the mere report of her landing on English soil, dressed as a man, with a company of two women, four men, and a blackamoor who ate at her table, the reigning French mistress had fainted with the cry, ‘I am lost.’ Nor had she done anything since to repel the advancing invasion, she had sat sunk in tears and lethargy, while her brisker English rival hastily seized

a fresh title, grant of land and increase of pension, with that greed and nonchalance that had always stood her in good stead in a crisis.

But the Mazarin was in no hurry to march on London. She had made a stay for some weeks now at Stoking on her way from the coast, and there she sat, chinking gold coins on to the basset table, teasing her simple host into paying her debts and giving her presents of Oriental curiosities, watching the silly pretty girl she had brought from France play with her white sparrows and black and white spaniels and flutter the cluster of ribbons she always wore in imitation of La Fontange, King Louis's silly, pretty mistress who had died young. The black and white spaniels and white and black gloves gave the girl's fairness a silver and transparent quality. 'My Puss,' the Mazarin had called from the basset table, 'if you had sense you would wear black ribbons instead of blue.'

Ned Tarleton sometimes called the girl *La Mazarinette*, and sometimes *Lesbia*, because of *Illa Lesbia* who had also fed her pet sparrows from her lip. She pouted, she said, 'I am not like that. The English are so censorious. Madame dresses as a man merely because it is the fashion, and becoming, and so do half the ladies at your Court.'

For she was so ignorant as to confound *Lesbia* with *Lesbos*, and since the vices of that exotic island were

said to have grown fashionable at the Court, to fit the cap to her blonde head.

Nor did Ned appease her by telling her of Catullus and his Lesbia. She told him that any girl would find it trying to be loved by a poet. For sixteen centuries, his famous verse had rendered her infamous. She could leave no record of what she thought of him, but there were his intolerable poems being brought up with her cup of chocolate every morning, to prove her wrong to all eternity. Why did she never burn them? If she did, the brute kept copies.

He found her adorable when she tilted back her pale pretty face and long chin; a crescent moon of a face; he often told her that a sparrow should perch at each end of it. And he found the Mazarin magnificent, a Roman Empress, with the swaggering ease of a freebooter, the fresh beauty of a young girl, and, above all, a trans-European reputation. In twenty years, the connoisseurs all said, she would be as beautiful as ever, and when she came to be a grandmother, the men would still fight duels for her. The Dowager Lady Stoking had good reason to fear such a guest for her elderly son, and would complain in her presence that England had become a mere rubbish-heap for runaway wives. The Mazarin paid her no attention, except to ask how many more stories she knew about the late Queen Mother's clever little dogs.

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Lady Stoking had only once told a story about a dog, and revenged herself by remarking at intervals how odd it was that short skirts and even breeches had become a feminine fashion, since they exposed the distressing prevalance of thick ankles, knock knees and bow legs. And women who tried to look like boys by cropping their hair only enhanced the ravages wrought by rouge and white lead. There was no style even in vice. All the old standards were gone, birth was now of no account, vulgar actresses took precedence of noble blood, even the women wrote.

This last she said as Ned entered the drawing-room, and Mrs. B., the lady novelist, was looking pensive. Lady Stoking's incisive nose stabbed forward at his appearance, the white of her eye rolled in pursuit of a fresh victim.

'Where have you come from, young sir? Was last night's debauch too much for you, and did the King leave you in the cellars?'

He could not think what she meant. It was not likely that an old woman was making up mere tomfoolery.

'Surely, Madam, the King was not here last night?' he asked.

'What an ignoramus! Where were you then last night? You listen so much, you should hear more. Well if you don't yet know what happened here, you had best ask Sir Roger.'

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Her chuckle came deep from the folds of her neck. Mrs. B. laughed in concert, rolling her eyes round at Ned and opening her mouth so wide he thought she would have swallowed him. 'Yes, ask our faithful Towser. He came back from Cambridge yesterday, barking like a good watchdog over his kennel the Press. He'll be glad to tell you.'

He was afraid of these women writers; she had a hungry, wolfish gaze, and she too was afraid, he did not know of what, of poverty perhaps or of not being thought respectable, or of being thought too respectable, or of not being witty, for she never dared open her mouth without some display of wit. When doubtful, as in her last effort, she adopted a clipped way of speech which at least sounded scathing.

But now she was showing her form again, for old Lady Stoking had given her an excellent chance by praising her son's filial affection. It was that alone, she declared, which had so far prevented his marriage.

'Incest is so much in the mode,' murmured the novelist, holding her trophy up to Ned for his private approbation.

'Is charity?' he asked.

'Fie, sir, what new vice is that?'

'I cannot tell, Madam. I have never met with it in this company.'

It was a good passage of arms. He wondered if they

would notice if he jotted it down in his commonplace book for future use, but it was not worth the risk. If Mrs. B. saw him she would be merciless. So he did not write, but remembered to smile as he stood with his head a little bent in gracious attention to the conversation that buzzed and cracked all round him.

Through a burst of laughter he heard that Lord Clifford had hanged himself, remarking that there was a God, a just God above, and that that pious man Mr. Evelyn had said 'this if true, is dismal.'

In the French provinces, a lady of noble birth had been burnt as a witch. France might lead the world but her imagination was still hag-ridden.

A clergyman's daughter had been brought to the King at the Newmarket races and proved such an original that she jumped out of a window to escape him, and so was killed.

Suicide, sorcery and rape were served up in mockery as piquant dishes, yet they were real, they happened in the world that went on outside this bright fire-lit room.

On a stormy afternoon some weeks ago, just before the candles were lit, he had fancied he saw a face outside, peering in, dark against the light, with bright, watching eyes and elf-locks blown in the wind. He had been talking with the Lesbia of the Sparrows, and found some pretext to go to the window with her and open it, but there was no one outside, it could only

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have been a gust of blown leaves or a trick of light and shadow. Yet so strongly did this imagined face affect him that his memory could paint it now against the glass, a wild face that invited him outside to a world of freedom and adventure where passions found issue in dark and terrible actions, not in a perpetual flippant commentary.

He could have no practice in expressing such thoughts, they were as out of place as the raging seas and speeches of dying kings that the old-fashioned poets delighted to mouth and thunder. And because he could not express them, he remained only half conscious of them, as of the leaves that tapped now and again at the windows, vaguely discomfoting him.

At the back of the room, a page was singing to a guitar the words of a modern poet.

Love like other little boys  
Cries for hearts as they for toys,  
Which when gained, in childish play,  
Wantonly he throws away.

To the accompaniment of his song, of laughter and the clatter of coffee-cups, the gossip took a lively turn.

'The ridiculous creature has married for love.'

'Who is the unlucky man?'

'Unlucky indeed for King Louis has clapped him into prison for his impudence before the marriage was consummated.'



'Then I call him lucky. She must be well over forty, —a romantic old maid with a big nose.'

'You have not had the cream of it. She loved him because he talked as well as her father, and now his conversation consists only of reproaches.'

It took Ned a moment to realize that *La Grande Mademoiselle*, the haughty beauty that had despised King Charles as an awkward youth, was this figure of melancholy fun. For an instant he thought he saw her shadow once again on the wall, but it was that of the cockatoo on its perch. The candles had just been lit against the dark winter's daylight; perplexed by the lights and noise, it had raised its crest and stepped up and down with a martial air, truculent yet nervous.

The Mazarin saw it too, the Mazarin must have seen his thought; she was a devil, that woman, he did not wonder that black magic was reported among her many vices

'Look at him,' she shrieked, pointing at the cockatoo, 'he is imitating the old hag when she reads aloud those tedious heroical plays and romances.'

Old Lady Stoking took up the hue and cry. She had seen letters from her, for she had known a dear friend of hers and many a laugh they had had together over that ideal kingdom she had attempted to share with so many. Out it all came, the hermitages full of amiable company, the sheep they were to guard, the arts

they were to foster, the celibate conditions, all in the name of the one true emotion, Friendship.

'Just such an Elysium,' broke in Mrs. B.'s chipped, scornful voice, 'as this in which we find ourselves.'

'Is the company so entirely celibate?' asked Ned.

'Fie, sir, let us not be smutty. I would have all young men of the same mind as my husband who forbade the wenches on his estate to milk the cows lest it should put ideas into their heads.'

The Mazarin strode across the room as she spoke, displaying a perfect leg beneath her satin breeches, and playfully flicked his cheek. He longed to repay her with a stinging slap. She had no right to dress as a man if she could not be treated as one. He suddenly ceased to think of her as a Roman Empress. He wished that country house parties could last only for days instead of weeks and months. He wished he could have gone on the expedition with Captain Baker to discover the North-West Passage through frozen mists and ice mountains as blue as sapphire and transparent as glass.

The silly doll she brought everywhere with her was lisping affectedly as she wound one of her dangling ribbons round a throat like a flower-stalk, 'I had thought the country would be full of sheep wearing pink and blue ribbons round their necks.'

'There are plenty of sheep,' said Ned, 'but no ribbons; that is why none of this flock can recognize them.'

'Do you call us sheep, sir?'

'Certainly, Mademoiselle, led by an ancient bell-wether, whose impotence naturally delights in jeering at others also isolated from the flock.'

'You are very ill-natured about an old woman as soon as she leaves the room.'

'Then let her keep her tongue off other old women.'

'What, are you serious? Is it possible? Was La Grande Mademoiselle then your first love?'

The lady novelist cried, "Look, you have drawn blood to his cheeks. Fie! How far did the matter go?"

'Charming,' chimed in the Mazarin's deep tones. 'And did you kiss her on both sides of her nose?'

He had tried to preserve his panache, but to sustain battle for his Princess in a drawing-room against the tongues of ladies, was to require too much of him. Common sense, not chivalry, was the rule of the age, and what good could he do at this distance to a disappointed old maid? The cynicism of this reflection reassured him. He had no wish to feel that he too was eleven years out of date.

'Why did you speak so angrily? Tell us, dear Ned.'

The doll he had despised was charming when she crossed her embroidered gloves caressingly on his shoulder, gloves perfumed moreover with orange and amber.

He said with an air of languor, 'Why does one speak at all, but that it is the mode to be ill-natured?'

That was better. He was in character again. No angry discord disturbed the tinkling clatter of china, of silver bells round the necks of spaniels, of gently spoken scandal. No strange earnest face looked in upon that company, taking them unawares with thoughts of age and isolation, of the bitterness of frustrated hopes. The fate of La Grande Mademoiselle was once again ridiculous, and therefore impossible for themselves. For no one recognizes his own character in a lampoon till some painstaking friend points it out.

As for that odd young man, Ned Tarleton, who had turned so abruptly on his heel and walked away from them, they were sorry for him, that was all; he had been too much of late with Rochester, and such company was too heady a drink for any young man; and so he gave himself airs, he mistook rudeness for wit, he obviously disliked women, it followed therefore that he indulged in unspeakable vices, he was ridiculously affected, he was shockingly insolent, he had debauched the parson's wife and that was why he had been absent last night, he had insulted his hostess, he had lampooned his best friend.

After this round of ammunition, they all hastily added that he was a most promising young man and they were anxious on his behalf only because it would

be a thousand pities if such excellent parts found their way to the jail or the scaffold.

He had joined Sir Roger L'Estrange who also seemed out of it in this company, his heavy face was more scowling than usual. Ned had been told to ask him what had happened last night, that meant he must do so warily, for he guessed the intention to have been malicious. He was right, for Sir Roger had been badly disappointed.

He had discovered Cambridge to be a hornet's nest of sedition, he was certain there was an illicit press somewhere in the town that distributed books free from the eye of the Licenser through those pernicious secret agents the travelling pedlars. If he had his way, every pedlar's pack should be examined at each village before he was allowed to sell any of his wares. That meant a special official in each village. 'No matter,' said Sir Roger, 'no expense should be spared for the purity of the Press.'

Late last night he returned to Stoking and found no one in the dining-hall but tittering servants. Chairs were pushed back or overturned, glasses were empty, all was deserted and in confusion. He at last discovered that the King himself had arrived unexpectedly on his return to London after a visit to the Earl of Shaftesbury

'He came alone then?' asked Ned.

‘Only a few of his gentlemen attended him, and a body of thirty or forty horse, to which,’ Sir Roger added in exasperation, ‘he alluded as “part of his nightbag.”’

‘But where is His Majesty?’

‘He departed early this morning. You know his brisk habits.’

Conscious of the female foes he had so lately made behind him, Ned did not dare show his feelings. The blood had mounted to his head in an angry wave, but they were watching him, they would pounce with delight on any sign of chagrin, and so he smiled in a jaunty manner that Sir Roger not unnaturally found irritating.

For Sir Roger, though present last night, had had no chance to display his enemies’ treachery and his own vigilance. He had been led into the cellars, where by the light of a couple of lanterns he saw a group of gentlemen sitting or reclining on the great casks, and among them the King himself in the act of knighting some miserable rascal for a joke he had just made, so that he stood there with drawn sword, swaying somewhat on his heels, as he solemnly pronounced, ‘Rise, Sir Edward—hic—Hooper, Knight.’

He was at once aware that his news would get no attention. Instead, it became the turn of the centre cask to receive the royal compliments; bowing to it,

the King promised to have a crown placed in the middle of the cellar arch, just over its head. The workmen were already busy on this piece of folly, and their host as pleased as if he had received a duchy.

‘That is how he keeps these fools content,’ said Sir Roger. All his reward for his guidance of the nation’s mind was £400 a year for his paper *The Intelligencer*; whereas he spent at least £500 a year on entertaining spies for information. But all failed to recognize his disinterested service, he could not flatter and fawn, that was why; even his love of music was turned against him. They still called him Old Noll’s Fiddler because he had once been playing with one or two others at the house of an acquaintance, when the Lord Protector had entered, but not allowed any interruption of the music; he had merely sat listening for some while and at last departed without any word on either side. Yet this old tale they tried to twist against him, ‘and after all I’ve done,’ he muttered, but not so that Ned heard him.

This new tolerance everywhere he found as soft and as depressing as a feather bed on top of him, it smothered all opinions, it put everybody on a level. He decided, as he always did when disappointed, to retire to the country, plant the potato and that other American root they called the Girasol artichoke, and translate the classics. He, who could share his principles and

fears and furies with so few, might yet find his best friend in *Æsop*. And so he did, for after two and a half centuries a public that had never heard of his ferocious attack on Milton in *No Blind Guides*, fell eagerly upon the new illustrated edition of L'Estrange's *Æsop* among the Christmas books of 1928.

But no prescient glow of this future harmony could now warm his spirit. He repeated the stale, bitter jest that the King's Act of Indemnity and Oblivion had been one of Indemnity for his foes and Oblivion for his friends.

'Then put a *b* into your daughter's name,' said Ned, 'and call her Oblivia lest you forget your grievances.'

Sir Roger looked sourly on him, and silently noted him as a dangerous modern spirit and one whose plays should be watched.

Ned saw he had been a fool, but he too was furious with disappointment. In the merry intimacy of that company in the cellar he would have had such a chance as he could never get at Court to attract the royal favour. Had he been there when Sir Roger showed his discontented face, his joke on his daughter's name would have won him friends as well as an enemy. Now he had gone and spat it out only on the subject concerned, an insane act, but he could never pickle his wit, it came fresh or not at all, and would have stood



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as good a chance to get him knighted in a cellar as the insignificant Hooper.

But swaggering to himself could not console him. The chance he might have had, he had thrown away. He had chosen to drink with bumpkins when he might have drunk with the King of England and of Boon Companions, and so sodden had it made his head that he had planned to write a stupid dull tragedy all about nothing as long as it was in the country and sufficiently dismal, a play that not one of the Court could glance at except to yawn. He was cured of that. He would instead write the most startling and impudent play that had yet been put on the stage. Even the King would have to take notice of it.

But everything he wrote would be an imitation, for everything had been said, everything discovered, there was nothing new under the sun. He had run after novelty, and missed the King; instead of careering with royalty into the cellars, he had followed a chase with a lot of roaring louts,—what was it they had chased through the house? Some wild animal he fancied, a wild cat perhaps; no, he thought it was something smaller, that he had heard a man shout something about a wren, or it may have been a sparrow.

And suddenly, with a clearness that convinced him he was remembering an actual scene of the night before, there came into his mind a picture of that

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company feasting round the table, when a bird flew in at a window that had been left open, hovered an instant in the light of the candles, and flew out again through the door at the other end.

The company left for the town early on the following day. Those in the coaches carried their muffs. The Mazarin's little blackamoor looked a livid lead colour from cold. 'Brrr! Your detestable country!' she complained. She had lost all her gaiety. She could think of nothing but her nose; it was a fine shape but large, and the raw cold did not become it. The country was flat, the sky one uniform cloud, the whole aspect sad and hostile to mankind. But their spirits were cheered as gradually they approached that cluster of buildings on the banks of the Thames, most of them new since the Fire, where there awaited them every opportunity their lives could afford.

The cavalcade passed on its way, leaving behind it a trail of gossip that spread over the countryside and furnished light refreshment for many months. It spread slowly, for winter now imprisoned the land. Snow and frost made the roads impassable; the ground was too hard to dig; the sheep grew like skeletons since it was not for another century that a useful dilettante was to introduce mangel-wurzels into England for their winter feeding. People could not meet for sport; the

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houses were too dark for much indoor work or reading, even supposing their inhabitants could read. A great deal more time was spent in bed since that was the warmest place, and long stories were told round the kitchen fire. As on every other year, the old men declared the winters were getting steadily worse since they could remember, and put it down to the growing laxity with regard to witches. The witch-hunts, duckings and executions had been a perpetual enlivenment to country life in their young days; now for several years there had not been more than two old women burnt, with a result that everyone could see for themselves in the bad weather and the report, which occurred yearly, that a wolf had been seen not ten miles off. The fact that it had not been seen nor heard of again, only proved it to have been a werewolf.

Mr. Hambridge saw more of Bess but he yawned more often both in her presence and her absence, and he drank more steadily, seeking from boredom an oblivion as near as possible to death. When he patted the dogs lying on the hearth and called them 'Good True—good Luby,' there was a wistful note in his voice that bespoke envy, for a dog's life was a good one when all was said and done; dogs had each other for companions and did not blow hot or cold with their humours and tantrums, changing all the time; dogs had no need and no chance to drink till they were

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fuddled so as to feel more cheerful than they really were, and then when the effect began to wear off, to feel yet more depressed. In this desire for an exaltation not natural to him, Mr. Hambridge experienced one of his few intimations of immortality, but the fate of beasts who are not so troubled seemed to him the more enviable.

His two companions no longer afforded him sport at table by twitting each other. Often they sat quite glum, and when they did speak it was with a respect that steadily increased. Nan now was scarcely ever rude or excited, though once or twice she unaccountably burst into tears and rushed from the table. Mr. Hambridge would then push the bottle over to his chaplain with some jocular remark expressive of relief at their finding themselves alone earlier than usual, and encounter a face so blank and wooden that he felt it was only he who was left alone, with nothing but a dummy in the room. His wife's coming had enlivened the chaplain at one time but now he was duller than ever. That was the worst of women, they changed things, sometimes possibly for the better, more often for the worse, but which ever it was they could not let well alone.

'Women are the devil,' he said, and was surprised to meet this time with acquiescence, surly but sincere. 'My Bess,' he continued, 'she lets things alone. A

man might as soon ride a mare as her. Dang me if you'd know she's a woman at all but for the money she gets out of you.'

'No,' said Mr. Cork and was silent a long time, staring at a blancmange in the middle of the table. It looked to him like passive white flesh, and he began to imagine it shaking horribly in motion. 'You could not kill her,' he at last proceeded. 'You could stamp on her as if she were a fungus but she would come up again like leather.'

'Ha, ha,' shouted Mr. Hambridge. 'That is a good one. I'll tell her so I will.' His laughter died uncomfortably away as it appeared that Mr. Cork had not after all intended a joke. These sharp fellows, they said things that sounded funny, and then sat and stared at you when you laughed as if you were a half-wit.

As in his wine-inspired perceptions on that Sunday when Mr. Cork had preached extempore, he knew his companions to be growing remote from him, and now from each other. Each member of the trio sat uneasily isolated. They would have believed the winter to last for ever, did they not know, and each of them often state, that now the days had finished drawing in, so they must inevitably in course of time begin to be drawing out.

Birds tapped at the windows of the oak room, seeing the bright fire inside, and thinking to get in out of the

cold. The two figures that sat there so stiff and silent, they took to be part of the furniture. One figure was very tall and sat straight up against the high carved back of his chair, his peruke fell in a long black curtain on either side of his face, shadowing it so that it too looked as if it were carved out of dark wood. The face of the other figure could not be seen, it bent so low, the hair falling forward over the table, the small shoulders hunched, and one hand moving laboriously.

Mr. Cork believed that to make Nan a scholar or at least an educated woman, would justify and console their union. It needed consolation, for he found the pleasures of the flesh an uneasy torment. His self-interest was terrified of exposure, his pride despised his fear.

She wished to be what he wanted her; with the frequent lack of humour of women in love, she sometimes wished she were a better woman for his sake. When he pointed out that that would scarcely further their intrigue, she cried a little, for it was all so hopeless, she could not be both good and bad. The dilemma was so absurd that she began to laugh. 'You are right,' she said, 'I am a bad woman and it is much better so. How could I be your lover if I were not? And then the King is bad as you are always telling me, and the Court, the women there have hosts of lovers. Why should people only be good in the country,

and only the women there too? It is not just nor reasonable.'

These arguments were not for herself but for him. She was continually trying to ease his conscience, for he was always worrying, always reproaching, sometimes himself, more often her, most often humanity. She wished as he hated humanity so much, he would let it alone more. It was as if he had expected it, and him, and her, to have changed utterly from the moment when he saw her message in his sermon, and preached about love.

'It *did* change,' he cried, 'the gates of Paradise were opened.'

'And you have entered,' she answered, flinging her arms round him.

He suspected Paradise to be only another cage.

One day she came running to him with a breathless tale, that Nurse had told her how Tom the carter's boy had had it from the cottage at Far End that King Charles had lain for one night at Stoking some weeks ago, and held court in the cellars because it was the properest place to drink, and in honour of it a crown had been stuck up over the main arch. He had been within eight miles of her and all this time she had never known of it. He saw her eyes shining as they had not done for many a day, and scarcely

knew what sickness made his head feel hot and swimming.

He had heard that women changed their whole natures when in love, that these frivolous and idle butterflies then contrived to wrap themselves in a thick cocoon of affection which bound their wings close and rendered them steady to the point of immobility. This he had never believed till now, when he wished to do so.

'If this woman really loves me,' he thought, 'could such a trifle enflame her curiosity, and God knows what loose desires?' He said aloud, 'That was on a night early in December, the very same that you took shelter in my arms, as you told me later, from a like crew of drunkards,' and waited to watch his effect. He made one but not what he expected.

'You knew of it and never told me!'

'I guessed you to have had enough of such company, but your courage is insatiable.'

His tone made her smart. She did not know of what she was accused but felt herself an inferior creature. If he rated her, she would give him cause.

'That same night!' she said. 'Then it might have been a courtier, perhaps even the King——' she broke off, for his face began to frighten her.

'What might?' he asked, and persisted. She flung back her head, shutting her eyes, and tried to speak lightly.



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'Why the strange gallant in a satin coat that I left lying on the floor of my room when I came to you. Think, Mr. Cork, I may have left the King to come to you.'

Her words ended on a cry for she felt his fingers round her throat. He told her if ever there were a chance of her becoming the King's whore he would kill her. 'What is it you want?' he cried, 'is it gowns, jewels, a duchy?'

'I want gaiety and good company,' she said, choking.

He released her. 'You'll get none of these things from me. Why did you come to me? I never called you. Why did you not stay with your drunken gallant on the floor? What did you think to get from me, a ruined man, a country chaplain, a dry pedantic Puritan?'

'Love,' she said, and her laugh had a wild sound. Her hands were round her neck, feeling it tenderly. She moved to go. He stood aghast at himself. He was driving her from him, and she was all that he cared for in the world. He must speak to prevent her, he must tell her he was sorry for treating her so, that perhaps he had been unnecessarily harsh. But the words would not come, his mouth was dry, his heart was dry, withered with a bitter angry wind that tossed his spirit to and fro, telling him he had been a fool to love too late.

'Love' was her own word. He could still say he

loved her. She would listen to that if to nothing else. But was he then to love and leave all in a tangle, unexplained, to reduce their intercourse to that of beasts that have no understanding?

She was putting up the latch. In another moment he would be quiet to explain things to himself, but she would have gone. He began in a hurry, his voice faint and husky, and to his own ears abject. 'Nan—wait—I did not mean—perhaps you are not as much to blame as I.'

Instead of answering, she tugged open the door. She could not have understood him, for she seemed in more haste to go than before. He had approached her tentatively, humbly, but now as with averted face she was passing through the door, he caught at her to make her stay. She ducked her head and bit his wrist. At his cry of astonished rage and pain, she looked up with pleasure, and in a flash disappeared.

She was not a woman, she was a savage, a beast. It was as degrading to a man of his culture to love her as if she had been a black Indian, captured from the wilds. He had driven her from him and his heart for ever.

She went out into the yard and sat on some logs there, regardless of the cold, and examined the particles of frost which covered them. Each one stood upright in the shape of a minute fan. When Queen Mab held

her court, her smallest elves would flutter these tiny crystal fans.

The pigeons pecked round her feet as tame as ever, though they were fast being killed off for winter pies.

Two stable-boys came into the yard and she called to them, asking news of a wrestling match to be held in the village. They answered her in slow burring voices as thick as honeymead. The voices she had heard through the window of the drawing-room at Stoking had been quick and light.

The sun rolled down over the misty edge of the marsh like a dull red ball. The stable-boys stumped away, blowing on their fingers. Through the dusk came a deep husky call and the sound of other footsteps joining them, going with them down the drive as far as the gates.

Mr. Hambridge and Bess never quarrelled. She did not think they ever spoke. She wondered if they were not the happiest people she knew. If so, she did not wish to be happy. But what then did she wish?

She sat there half frozen, watching the approach of the winter's night. At last she thought she would go into the kitchen; it would be warm there, full of bustle, of people coming and going on the red-tiled floor, of firelight and savoury smells and kindly, homely voices, and she would sit so close to the fire that she would begin to nod and fall asleep as a dog does.

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But Nurse would be scolding the maids and probably her too as soon as she appeared, for Nurse grumbled the longer and louder as the winter advanced; nothing was right, nobody did any work but herself, and then they accused her of interfering; she locked up the stores as somebody must do and then they accused her of accusing them of stealing; and it all came of having no proper mistress to take charge, as she told Nan now every time she saw her. For Nurse knew by now that she was quite safe in doing so, that her offers or rather threats of abdication would not be accepted, and that she could have the glory of power combined with that of martyrdom.

She needed compensation, for her rheumatism grew worse among the marshes, and she had given up her life-long friends to come with Nan. She and Lady Ingleby had grown to suit each other very well, whereas each day increased her dissatisfaction with Nan. She had adored her as a child, and still really thought of her as one. But she felt it her duty to remember that Nan should now be considered as a young married woman, and as such she did her no credit.

Nan went into the house but did not go to the kitchen. She went upstairs to the gallery where it was all dark, and felt her way from window to window of lighter darkness, until she came to Mr. Cork's room. She opened the door and stood there a moment, dazzled

by the sudden light of the candles. She went silently to his chair, dropped down by his knee and hid her face in his hand.

He could not remember his disappointment in her, but only that he had made her unhappy, that she was indeed not like a woman but a defenceless creature that he, and not he alone, was bound to hurt. An agony of protective passion again beset him. He cursed himself to her for being what he was. 'I should never have been born,' he said, but what was the use of that? He told her she should find another gallant, he was too old for her, too glum, severe, and carping. He had often said this before, not wildly as he spoke now, but with a show of reason and altruism. Now that his words broke from him in passionate sincerity, they sounded in his ears like the pronouncement of his own doom.

He had sought to cultivate indifference and thus safeguard himself against the disaster that it made inevitable. His fellow-workers had complained of this same tendency to forestall trouble and therefore cause it. In love, as in ambition, he could not escape himself. For so long he had wished the world were different, now he only wished that he could change.

'I wish I were different too,' she said. In a quick, coiling movement she slid up into his arms; they clutched her to him with the eagerness of a starved

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man. For a little time they did not wish that anything in the world were different.

When at last the spring began to show itself, he saw that she preferred to roam the fields, seeking for primroses, to talk with stable-boys, to play with the ragged children in the village, rather than learn from him. She came running to him as he walked, but that was only for a few minutes' heedless chatter, to show him what she had gathered, to ask him to come and see the new lambs in the hill-field or a nest she had discovered.

The spring brought fresh life to her, but it was a life that ebbed away from him. She no longer wept when he told her she should have loved a younger man; she more often lost patience and said very well then, she would not love him if he did not wish it. She flung away, rebellious, her hair tossing in the wind like the mane of a fiery young colt. And yet in less than a minute she was singing with happiness, she had so soon forgotten her anger with him. That hurt him most of all. He stooped and began to pick up the primrose buds that she had dropped as she threw out her hands in that gesture of revolt. They were small and nipped though March was just over.

The spring had come late and cold this year; he told himself it had come like the frost-bitten blooming of

his belated hopes. He let the buds fall through his fingers to the hard earth again.

Politics and love had failed him, but there remained truth. He would embody what he had learnt from the bitterness of his experience in a satire called *The Mirror of Mankind*, showing that men could only believe what they wished, and could never see themselves except when reflected in the flattering mirror of their hopes and vanity. Cheered by this thought, he resumed the paces that had been interrupted by an idle intrusion, and meditated on the ragged lawn so many sarcasms on the folly of love, the fickleness of woman and the weakness of man, that surely this time his labours would bring recognition of his parts, in wealth, in appreciation from even such as Nan.

In the woods was a stream between deep banks. At one place the earth had fallen away beneath the massive trunk of a tree, exposing its great roots. Nan sat on one of them, swinging her feet, then she crept underneath, where there was still room to sit upright, and more if she lay down. She looked up at the roots and thought they were like the beams of a house. The trees were all still quite bare, so she had thought, but at that moment the sun came out and a thousand little points of green suddenly gleamed before her. They had all come in the last few days, and the

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primroses in this sheltered spot had opened into full moon faces.

A fish sprang out of the water into the sunlight. The brown stream gurgling over its stones, the brown earth and brown bare trees, were all spangled with jewels. She clapped her hands together, she thought how she would bring Mr. Cork here to see what she had just seen. But then she thought she would not bring him, she would show this place to nobody, and later on she would make a house here which nobody would ever know of but herself.

The tree she sat under was a chestnut, its buds would soon grow fat and sticky and then burst into green fans, growing broader and broader. She would pick branches of them, and great fronds of fern and bracken, and lay them crossways over the roots to make a roof, and she would make a fire, and tickle trout and roast it, and pick some of the cresses that grew up-stream, and stay here all night when it was hot, and see the moon come up over the trees, and perhaps have a gipsy for a lover since Mr. Cork no longer cared for her, and the gipsy woman on the road had told her she should have three husbands but only one ring.

She had picked some lobed grasses to chew as she came through the fields, and began to pull off the lobes so as to tell her fortune concerning this new gallant that Mr. Cork was always telling her to find. The first



grass told her she should meet her true love this year, the second that he was a beggar, the third that he lived in a palace, the fourth that he dressed in satin, the fifth that he would love her for ever.

With the sun hot on her head and the primroses at her feet, she began to laugh and laugh as though she were going mad with joy, as the poor people do in Muscovy when the spring comes suddenly after the long winter. So Mr. Cork had said. He would never go mad with joy. Let him be unhappy then since that was what he wished. But it disturbed her to have thought of him. Whatever she planned or played at, he was there in the background, waiting for her to come back to him. She thought, 'What if I never go back, but stay in my secret house from now on?'

And in a sense she did, for from that day she knew she had that place all her own to escape to, and whatever happened to trouble her, the thought of it gave her security.

So suddenly did the sunshine and mild rains come when once they began, so quickly did her hiding-place change from brown to green, and show itself on each visit more set about with flowers, first gold-mines of celandines and then anemones as bright as stars, and then deep-hued violets and then bluebells, that one noonday as she sat there and looked out on the stream in the first swift rush of early summer, it was as though

it were on the same occasion as when she first found it, and that all that she had done was to wish; so that with one accord, not waiting for the due course of nature, a roof of leafy branches and bracken, warm and crumpling, was spread above her head, and a shimmer of teeming life now hummed and danced in the heat.

A host of mayflies skimmed the pool. Bubbles floated up to its surface from some unknown life sunk in the mud, and each as it sped down the sunlit stream bore ahead of it a bigger brighter globe of reflected light. Everything reflected made a globe, even the long legs of the water-spiders, thin as hairs.

The chestnut blossoms fallen from the tree above her swam fast along, sporting their minute pink and white sails, each with a shining world at its feet. As on the water, they brought their reflected worlds into her mind, an image of the page she had seen in the autumn, all frilled and beribboned in white and dull pinky-red, of the cups he had carried, like painted egg-shells. They brought a suggestion of fashion and rarity, of fragility and savagery, of monstrous birds and dragons depicted on porcelain, of the shockingly amusing new play Moll had written of, that had made china unmentionable especially by a Country Wife.

She had seen nothing, been nowhere, met nobody, but ignorance and folly do not shut the spirit. She possessed the world in miniature as she sat in her

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house of roots and branches, looking out upon the stream.

A cloud built like a castle came up over the brilliant sky, it had white turrets and a long black banner flying out before it on a wind that had not yet reached her. In a few minutes, the mayflies and the white butterflies dancing over the burnished gold of the broom flowers would be destroyed in a thunder shower.

As on the cold spring day when she had dreamed all this, a fish leaped into the sunlight. There came another splash, a glimpse of unearthly blue, and a kingfisher darted over the pool and away down-stream.

Delight, dazzling and transient, seized her. She saw that life was gorgeous, cruel, and swift, lasting but a second, she saw that men are as helpless as mayflies. She knew nothing of what she saw, only that she was glad because Mr. Cork was going away to-morrow for a long time, that she was tired of him and he of her, but there was no need for them all to be gloomy for ever, especially now the summer had come. He had often told her that the union of the flesh was of small account compared with that of the soul, why then should they repine because theirs had ceased?

On her return, she met Mr. Cork striding over the fields in search of her. He spoke wildly as he came up to her.

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'I must go to-morrow,' he said. 'You cannot have known it. I thought I had told you but I grow absent. I may not be back for some weeks. Surely I told you it was to-morrow I leave for Cambridge.'

'Yes you told me. What is the matter?'

A blackbird was mocking her. On the topmost branch of a tree he whistled up into the yellow sky a few clear notes like the first notes of the dance tune, 'Oh dear what can the matter be?' He could not finish the line but began again and again as though he were trying to remember it, but the tune danced on in her head. She had to play it on her fingers to keep from singing it aloud.

But she had known as she spoke what was the matter. He was going to reproach her for wandering so long away from him on his last day here, and if he did not, if he shut his mouth down like a trap on his reproaches, it would be much worse. Yet they had no more to say to each other to-day than yesterday or any other day for weeks and weeks.

He would tell her no more stories. She was afraid of all she said to him lest it should hurt or anger. The union of the soul had proved no more lasting than that of the flesh. She was glad that he was going and had known it just now when she was in her secret house. Yet now, seeing him with that ravaged look upon his face, she wished that she was sorry. Before he could

peak, she held out her hands to him and cried, 'But what can we do? We don't love each other any more. You have said so.'

'I said it of you, not of myself, and if I did it was because I was driven to it.'

'What drives you?' she asked, bewildered, for his face did indeed give the look of a man who is urged forward by some impulse not his own. And so, though he answered 'Myself,' she felt it was not fair, that something had happened to him that he as well as herself could not understand, nor help.

He put his hands on her shoulders. He was asking her in a thick hurried tone, and low, though the fields and marsh were bare as the sky all round them, to come to him once again that evening, for the last time if she wished it. 'It may be the last time I shall ever see you,' he said, 'I may never come back.'

As he said that, something leaped in her heart like the fish she had just seen in the pool. She said to herself, 'Now I know why I was so happy,' for twice a fish had come to tell her she would be. Then she was ashamed and shut her eyes tight, but still the fish leaped like a curved sword in the sunlight, and the kingfisher darted away down the stream.

She heard him say, 'Why do you shut your eyes against me?' And then, 'You have found my love irksome and repellent. I know that. But forget that

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now. Nan, it will be different, I promise you it will be different from ever before. Nan, do you hate me now? Do you love anyone else?"

She opened her eyes on a dazzle of evening sunshine and Mr. Cork's face dark against it. 'You know there is no one else to love,' she said.

His laughter went reeling and tearing away over the fields. She threw her arms round him, looking up into his face. 'Oh,' she cried, 'I will love you, indeed I will love you, if only you will not be so unhappy.'

'Oh dear what can the matter be?' sang the black-bird.

It could not matter, it could make no difference, she had given herself to him before, and now it was only for the last time.

Only once more would she go down the long gallery, in and out of the seven squares of dark light chequered with criss-cross lines where the summer night shone through the small window panes.

So soon was she doing this that it seemed she had but thought of it and then was there, that it was not herself at all that was walking down the long gallery, but only someone in a dream that she had dreamed that afternoon.



*Part* IV





## PART IV

NED TARLETON came again to Stoking and not of his own accord. He had learnt that it was unwise to make jokes on politicians to their faces, that it was even unwise to make them on the King, and above all on his mistresses, to the public in a play. For that reason, his absence from Court had been recommended as beneficial for a season, and Lord Stoking had kindly offered his country house as shelter. The French and Italian cooks were not there of course, nor the new hangings nor most of the furniture, but there were two or three old country servants left to look after the place who would see to him and his horse, and there would be no one but village wenches to get him into trouble.

For the first few days Ned enjoyed having the great house to himself. He could wander through the rooms and imagine himself the master of them, plan how he would alter or furnish them and fill them with his friends.

Here had stood the group round the basset table when the Mazarin played high, there they had broken a vase with their battledores and shuttlecock, here he had quarrelled with Mrs. B., but was never quite sure if she had quarrelled with him, and there in that

corner had stood the little Lesbia's cage of white sparrows. For the life of him he could not see her in a blue bandeau as his actual eyes had done; the Mazarin's commanding tones had carried more conviction, 'My Puss, if you had any sense you would wear black ribbons,' and black she wore in his imagination while the black and white spaniels leapt about her feet, and once again the air seemed full of brittle sounds, the twitter of birds, the laughter of a girl, the tinkle of dogs' bells and sharp metallic tiny barks, the chink of gold coins on the basset table.

Then again it was silent, the room was full only of shadows from the half-shuttered windows, it felt chill in here away from the sunlight and Ned felt melancholy and went out into the gardens to pace up and down the rose walk and think that this was what he would be when he was an old man like Mr. Evelyn who cared for gardens more than companions.

'And I too am old, for I have only memories for company,' and he thought with bitterness of all the merry friends he had left in the town who had at once forgotten him when he was in disgrace. No, that was not all true though he hated to admit it, for bitterness is sweet when it is thorough, and in a few more turns of the rose walk Ned would have been comparing himself not to Mr. Evelyn but to Timon of Athens or possibly King Lear.

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But Lord Stoking had given him shelter and good advice, told him to go away and learn not to be so sharp as to cut himself, told him that 'you writing devils clap a man into satire faster than the old Oliver men used to clap 'em into jail,' told him to take time and thought away from the wits who talked so much they had little time to write, and see if he couldn't turn out a play as good as they used to have in his father's time, for in his opinion, 'and you may call me an old-fashioned fool if you will, my boy, but I'll stick to it,' there had been nothing since to beat old Will Shakespeare. And here was Ned with an advantage Will Shakespeare can never have had, in being sent down to a great empty house in the country all alone to write. Certainly he ought to think of a play that would beat any of his.

The air was cold for late June but the sky shone blue above, the roses bloomed all round him, he was in Paradise, and as an odd friend of Prince Rupert's had remarked,

Two Paradises 'twere in one,  
To be in Paradise alone.

But the satirical fellow was a Puritan and a politician, you could not go by him. And though he felt bored and lonely he could think of nothing tragic. Perhaps when he was as old as Mr. Evelyn, a grave majestic phrase might leap unbidden to his lips such as he had

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once heard him speak in discussing foreign troubles abroad; 'there came an uncertain bruit from Barbadoes of some disorder there.'

But Ned was of the younger generation and must belong to his time, and when he meditated a poem on Nature in his stern determination not to be in the mode, it turned out in some such way as this:

Chloris, the spring in grassy glade  
Paints emerald on every bough,  
But not her freshest leaf or blade  
Shows verdure quite as green as thou.

He doubted if he were truly one of the tragic poets. The Court Cupid favoured the Comic Muse. Who then could write a tragedy of love, and if not of love, what else was there?

Then he remembered that on the last day of his last visit here, riding alone on a suddenly wintry morning, he had all but thought of a tragedy, he had intended to shut himself up in his own room as soon as he returned and write a play that would make a revolution in Court drama. But when he returned, the place was all in a bustle, everyone was going back to the town and he had to join in the preparations, there had been some sort of fuss and trouble with the women, he had forgotten what; then he had found that he had missed the King, and then that he had offended Sir Roger L'Estrange; and these troubles outweighed the im-

portance of any imaginary tragedy so that long before he had reached London it was crushed flat in his mind and he had not thought of it since.

'Till now,' he said aloud and laughed up at the sky so that a startled bird flew from one tree to another, chattering and scolding. Here was an adventure ready to hand. He would ride to Cricketts and discover whose was the lady's room he had slept in so inadvertently on his last visit.

The groom thought his young master must have been recalled to London, so cheerfully did he stride into the courtyard and bawl his abuse at the lazy lousy lout for keeping him waiting. He made his toilet with care, and finer than was necessary for a country ride.

He rode across a golden marshland and wondered that he had ever thought this landscape grim and forbidding. He rode up a drive of rustling beech-trees so high and green that he seemed to be riding in an avenue at the bottom of the sea. He came to a big square house whose stone front looked warm and mellow in the light of the late afternoon. He had expected it to be grey. All this green and gold had made the scene so different from the one he had left more than six months ago that he had a momentary doubt lest he had come to the wrong place.

He was reassured by the old man who came into the yard as he entered, for he could not fail to recognize

that loose-hung jaw, covered with uneven tufts of greyish hair. He asked three times for Mr. Hambridge before he learned that the master was four miles off at a bull-baiting and all the lazy lads of the place with him. He would be back for supper for sure.

‘Then I’ll wait,’ said Ned, and dismounted.

He went up the steps into the hall but no servants came out towards him. In the darkness of the interior the place now reminded him of his first impressions of it, for it looked uncared for and decayed. He saw a wide staircase that he remembered, and unconsciously felt his finger for a nip in the flesh that had long since healed.

‘It was through that door that we fed and drank so long,’ he thought, and opened a door into a long low room that smelt of food and stale air. It was nearly dark because both walls and ceiling were panelled with oak and the windows small with leaded panes of greenish bottle-glass.

Because of this and because she was so still, he did not at the first instant see that a female figure was sitting at the end of the room in a high carved chair, looking at him out of the gloom like a white bottled spider out of its dark corner. This repulsive image flew into his mind before he had had time to observe what the female was like, but now he saw that she was big and fat and very white, that her eyes regarded him

with a strangely passive expression, for they showed no surprise nor interest. Nor did she move her head nor as much as an eyelid in greeting as he advanced towards her. Her appearance was in every way odd, for her clothes were sluttish and bedraggled and cut in the manner of a country servant's, and yet they were of very handsome stuff; she was plastered over with brooches, locketts and pendants of a heavy old-fashioned kind, and on each dirty white sausage of a finger there shone a ring, her hands spread on the arms of the chair, displaying them.

He bowed, he begged to present his apologies for taking her by surprise, his regrets that he had not forewarned Mr. Hambridge of his arrival, his request—but here he faltered and lost courage, he did not think that he could now bear to wait for nothing more than that oaf's return and in the company of this creature. It swept over him with horror, with a shamed repugnance that none of his own misdeeds had ever caused him, that it must have been in this woman's chamber that he had spent his previous night at Cricketts. He felt he had been contaminated, he longed to fly from the food-ridden air.

Stammering some excuse about his horse, he was turning towards the door when suddenly he remembered holding in his hand a tiny pointed clog, tied with a thong of scarlet leather. A woman that size could



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never have worn it. But it was possible that she was diseased, that that was why she did not move because she could not, and that in that case her feet, from never being used, remained the size of a child's. But if she could not walk, what need of wearing clogs? Her skirts were long and carefully arranged over her feet which were high mounted on a stool. They could give him no answer. He could torture himself with doubt no longer.

He said bluntly, 'You are Mr. Hambridge's spouse?'

The creature gave a sign of life. She simpered. She said presently, 'In a manner of speaking.'

He did not wait for more. He went out of the house and bawled through the empty courtyard for the old man to bring his horse, and demanded of him, 'Why did you not tell me the lady of the house was alone within? I would not have intruded had I known.'

'The lady, lady of the house?' yammered the old man.

'Yes, you fool.' On a sudden rising note of hope, he added, 'Isn't it Mr. Hambridge's wife who is sitting in there?'

'That Mrs. Anne?' chuckled the old man, 'you took that one for Mrs. Anne?'

'Who is Mrs. Anne?'

'Why the master's lady.'

'And who is that?'

'Why the master's miss.'

'And she sits there in the best room? Where's Mrs. Anne?'

'Ah, that's where no one can say.' The old man now looked intolerably wise. He wagged his chin so that the tufts on it caught on the breeze.

'Why so secret? There's no secret about Miss in there.' And he nodded and winked while fingering his purse, so as to look as knowing as the old man.

'Tis because nobody can know for certain, though mind you, young sir,' and he edged nearer to the house, eyeing the purse very cunningly, 'there'll be worse places to look in than the orchards, I'll be bound.'

He held out his hand with the air of having conferred a great service. Ned was not quite sure if he had received information, but gave him another shilling and again dismounted, saying with great formality so as to cover the absurdity of his change of movements: 'Then in that case since there is a chance of my receiving the entertainment suitable to a gentleman, I will after all await Mr. Hambridge's return to supper.'

He could not tell if such a jaw were grinning. He stalked away, trying not to walk too fast, in the direction where the oaf had pointed when he mentioned the orchards. He came through the untidy gardens into a meadow and thought he must be at fault until he saw

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the fruit-trees clustered together in a hollow at the bottom.

The ground sloped sharply towards them and was covered with long grass and moon daisies, their white and gold faces all turned towards him. A cold breeze turned their heads another way, chasing the evening sunlight from the field so that it looked dark and silver; then in another instant there were the daisies staring at him again, the sun was out, his eyes were dazzled with gold. Birds broke into song and were suddenly silent; he thought he heard bells on the wind but could not be sure. A shaggy donkey scampered away from him as frisky as a colt.

He too began to run downhill, then he stopped at sight of a cherry-tree that was shaking more violently than all the others. Fruit and leaves were tumbling from it, first one branch and then another heaved and trembled. He had the fancy that the tree was coming alive, and as he approached it, an elvish golden face peered out at him. The setting sun shone on it, on the bright leaves and the dark glossy cherries, outlining each of them with a gleaming rim.

He stood still. The face had disappeared. The tree was still. He was staring at a dazzle of golden leaves. He went beneath it and looked up at a girl who was sitting in the crook of a branch. She looked down at him with eyes that made him think of some shy, wild

creature. Her bare foot dangled beneath her skirt. It was brown and small. He stared at it, suddenly he stooped and picked up a clog that lay in the grass under the tree, a small pointed clog tied with a thong of scarlet leather.

‘I knew it,’ he cried.

‘That is my clog,’ said the girl in the tree.

‘You are Mrs. Anne Hambridge.’

‘How did you know?’

He did not wish to tell her how he had once before held that clog in his hand. He said, ‘I was told I should find you here.’

She too had known him from the moment when she had seen through the branches a young man running lightly down the hillside towards her, the fair curls of his periwig dancing on his shoulders, buckles flashing on his shoes, love-knots dangling all down his sleeves, lace tossing at his knees and wrists; curls, love-knots, laces, blown on the wind like the wings of cherubim bearing him towards her. Here was the young gallant Mr. Cork had so often told her to find instead of himself, here was her true love that the fortune grasses had told her she should meet this year, the beggar who dressed in satin and lived in a palace and would love her for ever.

She looked down at him and laughed. He looked up at her, he held out his hands to help her down, the

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grave look he had worn ever since he saw her broke into a smile and thence into easy laughter. The air was full of it, of the twitter of startled birds, the rustle of leaves, the scrambling, sliding sounds of her descent to a sprawling lower branch where he perched delicately beside her with due attention to his clothes. Not till then did they begin to talk, suddenly, rapidly, confidently, as though they would never stop.

She handed him cherries out of her apron which was all stained with their juice. She was lucky to be married, she said; at home her mother would have fed her on bread and water for this. Here there was no one to scold but Nurse and Mr. Cork, and he was away. A sullen frightened look crossed her face as she spoke his name, it was as though she had not meant to do so. She hurried to hold out more cherries to him, to tell him how early this one tree had ripened in the sheltered hollow.

‘You have earrings,’ she said, ‘and I have none,’ and she hung a bunch of cherries over each ear.

‘Do you not want to know who I am and where I come from?’

‘I know all about you.’

It was his turn to look anxious. He still did not know what had happened that night over six months ago.

‘What do you know?’

'That you are a beggar.'

'That is true, but how did you know it?' He looked with hurt pride at his clothes.

'And that you live in a palace.'

'Why yes, at Whitehall. What else do you know?'

She would tell him no more of what the fortune grasses had told. It was his turn to surprise her. 'The fellow clog to this one,' he said, holding it up, 'was tied with a green thong instead of scarlet.' No, he had not seen it in the grass. He could not find it. Neither could, but they soon gave up the search.

He told her his name was Tarleton and Ned to his friends. She told him she was called Nan, not Anne, and that her father used to call her Nancy Pretty, which was the name in these parts of a flower that grew in the cottage gardens. None So Pretty it used to be, which might be a compliment, but not the way her brothers and sisters took it. '*She's* none so pretty,' they would call to her, laughing at her. She described the cluster of tiny pink blossoms suspended so airily round their stalk that they seemed to be flying round it like a flock of doves round a dovecot—or the flock of little birds round the girl with white gloves that she had seen through the window of Stoking House. But she did not add that, for it would take time to explain it all to someone who had not seen it, and he was saying something far more interesting.

‘Why that flower is London Pride, and so would you be if you came to Court.’

‘I! Oh! My mother would not say so.’

Unflattering descriptions of her person and manners raced through her head. She gave him some brief samples. He looked at her gravely and did not call her beautiful, as a gallant should, and for this she was in some odd way grateful. But he told her that mothers and manners were no longer the mode.

‘Mr. Dryden has said that if a woman have but gaiety and good humour, she may be forgiven the lack of beauty.’

Yet as he said it he thought she stood in small need of such clemency. Certainly when he had seen her in the tree he had mistaken her for a beauty—or had he never thought about it? Never before had he looked at a woman without considering if she were beautiful or not, and now that he came to consider it, never before had he had such difficulty in deciding. For of course she was not beautiful, and most certainly not elegant, yet he could not take his eyes from her, he felt that if he did she might change into something else, and that at any moment he might find there was nothing but a squirrel or a bird on the branch beside him, or only the dazzle of the last sunbeam through the leaves.

At the same time he was telling her that to be natural and easy was all that mattered. The world had grown

franker and freer since the wars, and the people who counted were young and adventurous. Great ladies bawled Billingsgate jokes from their coaches in Hyde Park to young playwrights many yards away, or fell asleep in them with their mouths open. 'The real queen just now is an orange-girl from Drury Lane, and a little like what you might be if you had been bred in a London gutter instead of the woods.' As an extreme example of natural manners he cited a countess who, dressed as a page, held the Duke of Buckingham's horse while he killed her husband in a duel. 'Would you do the same if I killed yours?'

He had said 'husband,' yet she thought of Mr. Cork, and answered him with a sudden gleam of teeth and eyes: 'Sure, sir, if I went to Court I would follow the mode.'

'You would not. You would make it. You should never listen to your mother. No one listens to old women now unless they are very scandalous. Now I come to think of it, there are very few to be seen.'

'Have they all died?'

'No, they have grown young. Youth is the fashion. London is full of old women newly painted, and young men newly promoted. There is a new young Government every time the King's mistresses quarrel. When the last old man who governed left Whitehall, Barbara, Duchess of Cleveland, ran out into the aviary in her smock to laugh at his downfall, and all the young men



came and talked to her in her bird-cage and told her she was the bird of Paradise.'

He looked at her as he spoke and thought of a wren. When she flapped her hands on the branch in her delight, they were like the fluttering of small brown wings. Such an audience could not fail to make for wit. He had never talked so much nor so fast, nor did he have even an instant's regret that none at the Court had ever heard him to such advantage. He told her he was in disgrace there, and with laughter, for it now seemed the best stroke of fortune that had ever happened to him. Scandals soon blew over. The young Earl of Rochester was banished on an average of once a year and returned each time more in favour. No one could be troubled now to remember an affront or a pedigree or a debt or an obligation or an old love affair.

Ned's crime was a play that was thought to touch too nearly on the comedies of the Royal *ménage*. The King had laughed heartily, in the unfailing Royal tradition, but added, 'this is a good joke but bad policy,' and complained that it aided the erroneous impression that he was not the master of his mistresses. So it was taken off, and a ballet put on, at which the King yawned, and was heard to utter the cryptic statement that whatever the Royal Society might decide about the nature of the centipede, it was certain that women had too many legs.

'How my mother would agree with him,' cried Nan.

'The prude and the tired rake often agree,' said Ned sagely. 'But I talk all the time. It is your turn.'

'I have nothing to tell. Yes I have. I once saw the King. It was very long ago. I will tell that later.'

'Yes, for I said I would return to supper and I must not offend your husband.'

'He would not notice it. But all the thousand things you have begun—will there ever be time enough to tell me?'

'There is all time,' said Ned gravely, and he laid his hand on hers.

'I will show you my house,' she said.

'What—Cricketts Manor——' he drew away his hand.

'No, *no*. My house. I made it. No one else knows of it, not Mr. Cork, nor even Nurse. Out of branches and bracken,' she went on hurriedly. 'Down in the wood by the stream.'

'Who is Mr. Cork? You spoke of him before.'

'He is nobody. He is the chaplain. He is very grave and severe, but he has been very kind to me. He is old—old——' she had never known how old till she saw Ned.

'He is her lover,' thought Ned, and she saw him thinking it, and was glad, for she need not pretend.

The sun had slipped down, the fields had grown dark and the sky pale gold. They moved from the tree. She would go home apart from him and slip in by a back way, and when they met at supper they would pretend it was for the first time. He would say he had gone to look for his hostess but failed to find her.

Both had learned to lie from childhood; only, for a moment longer, they were still alone in a world where they need not lie. He took her hands in his. The dew clung round their feet, the wind had dropped, the birds were silent. The sickle of the new moon was now clear in the sky. She stood awaiting his kiss yet not wishing it. She gazed at him, seeing no longer the ribbons and laces of his Court clothes, seeing only the dimming face of her lover; and 'oh,' she sighed deep in her heart, 'if only it could be for the first time.'

The moment of suspense that had held them both as under a spell, was shivered; a light breeze rose again and stirred the rustling grasses so that in the dusk the white heads of the daisies were all turned one way. And as though caught unawares by the wind their two heads also turned to look and then back again, seeing each other, and on a little cry moved together and met in a kiss.

Nan did not again remember Mr. Cork. Now that she had kissed Ned, she no longer remembered that it was not for the first time.

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She left him to walk home a different way, and ran back to ask him one more question; started again, and this time it was he who called her back.

'Sweet, I must go,' and she went across the fields.

'Sweet, sweet, sweet.'

It was a blackbird calling. He had changed his tune.

Their caution was only for that first evening, a concession to Ned's civilized sense of decorum in the conduct of such matters. He was cured of it by supper time. Bess Tiddle was present. Nan sat opposite her and between Mr. Hambridge and Ned Tarleton. Ned averted his eyes whenever Bess ate, and that was most of the time. Nor did he enjoy the sight of his host. He dared not look sideways at Nan. She was curiously cool, he thought.

'It is only while Mr. Cork is away that Bess sups with us,' she had told him, 'they are afraid when he is here.' She spoke so easily of her husband's mistress that he might well have questioned her as to her own relations with him; yet he who had lived since a child in the two most profligate Courts of Europe found himself too bashful to approach so nauseous a subject. He had to remind himself at table that Nan could only be an unwilling victim, yet now that he was there on her other side, how could she hold her head so high and look so free? The repellent company affected his

own feelings towards her, he could not bear to think her insensible to it.

But soon he was to see her wince though not from that cause. Mr. Hambridge had at once recalled Ned's presence at the cock-fight among the others from Stoking Place, and welcomed him gladly. At supper some further memory impinged on his mind, he sat and stared at Ned, at last he said, 'You were the one that stayed to supper. A rare game we had that night. Remember how Mrs. Anne here gave us the slip?'

Nan's startled gaze penetrated even his heavy perceptions.

'Why,' said he, 'no harm done then, nor meant. Can't a man joke about a frolic more than half a year old?'

But none joked with him. Ned hastily explained how unaccustomed his head was to the country ways of drinking wine, mulled and sweetened, and then, as Mr. Hambridge began to lour upon him and mutter darkly concerning these thin white wines from France which he was told the fools at Court were content to drink, he had to assure him that his palate, though not his head, was all in favour of the country drinks, especially on a winter's night.

His host was appeased, he declared he must stay the night and drink till late with him. Ned insisted that he must return. As soon as they had finished eating,

Nan left the room. He soon contrived to follow her, and found her in the stable, sitting on the edge of the stall and stroking his horse's nose.

'I cannot stay and drink with him,' he said, 'and so I must go. I will come again to-morrow. But I cannot leave you here till then.'

He must rescue her at once from those sluggish monsters. He could not believe that she had been in that house close on ten months, 'and with that'—his voice choked, and finished after a pause with the words, 'your husband.'

'Was it you,' said Nan, 'who said that about the pea under the nine mattresses?'

He did not know what she meant. She leaned her face against his horse's neck so that he could not see it, and said, 'Yes it was. And you lay on the floor and your ring had a face on it set about with diamonds. I saw it at supper.'

La Grande Mademoiselle had given him that ring but he did not tell her, knowing that now she would scarcely attend to what would have pleased her earlier.

He could not think why they had both grown so unhappy.

Then he remembered that night. She had been in the room. She was horrified at him, who had presumed to feel distaste because she was married to her husband.

'Seneca——' he began.

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'I do not care to hear about Seneca,' said a miserable voice, muffled by the horse's neck. She had heard far too much of Seneca from Mr. Cork.

'If you will let me finish you will see that he bears my apology, for he has said "as often as I go among men, I return the less a man," and I have often found it true and wished it were not. We get together and drink and think we are gods, and become brutes. Nan, forgive me, you must forgive me.'

'You? But it is myself. Well then I'll tell you. No I won't. Oh, Ned, what shall I do? For it was *you* that I left lying on the floor, and if I had never seen you there I might never have gone, for I meant to go to Nurse, I remember that, and then I saw you and changed my mind, I don't know why. But you were only a drunken man fallen down in my room. How could I tell it was you?'

'Where were you then and where did you go?'

But there she stopped, she looked round at him with her cheek still laid against his horse, and her eyes glanced strangely at him and then fell.

He saw that she was not angry with him. He could not then see why it should matter now. It had all happened so long ago and they had not met then. Everything was different since they met. A wind had blown their heads together in a kiss. A wind had caught them up and was carrying them they did not know

where. Nothing that ha dhappened before then could matter now. He caught at her hand, he told her the world was new, and they only born in it to-day. They were young. All their lives lay before them for them to love each other.

But she hardly heard his eager stammering words though she heard his voice and knew that he loved her. She felt that she could never look at him, never think of him, without remembering how she had left him to go to Mr. Cork.

They met on the common or in the woods, and she took him to her house by the stream.

Foxgloves stood sentinel round it and bees buzzed in and out of the bells. She put her fingers in them and walked them up as on ladders. She cut a bracken stalk and showed him the tiny picture of an oak-tree that God has put in every one as a sign and a remembrance ever since King Charles escaped his enemies by climbing into an oak.

She had forgotten her sadness with him. He remembered, but only that he might enjoy her present enchanting happiness the more. The shadows that had troubled his own mind in that dreadful house sped away as fast as he now touched on them. Mr. Hambridge had never made her his wife; it was a miracle especially appointed for his sake.



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There was an island about two feet long in the stream just opposite the house under the chestnut-tree, and here they made a garden in the approved modern Dutch fashion. They waded in and out of the water and mud, they called to each other in low, serious voices, intent on their work. The summer-house and statues were of white clay mud. They made clipped trees from bits of holly and box, chopped them into fantastic shapes and stuck them in the ground as hedges round the moss lawns. They took twigs and stripped them bare and bound them together with threads pulled from Nan's linen dress. These were the gates of wrought iron into their miniature Paradise. Ned christened it Versailles in honour of the amazing new gardens King Louis had begun to build first for his La Vallière, a mistress better pleased with a cottage or a convent than a palace.

Mr. Cork's conversation had cast shadows from the world across her mind, of doubts and discontents and plotting troubled heads. Now Ned's talk gave her reflections of it as bright as those of the bubbles in the stream. A few big thunder raindrops fell, and made fountains in it the size of thimbles; the long rays of the setting sun painted in each a minute rainbow which they could see for an instant only. The fountains at Versailles were as tall as houses, the rain at Versailles, according to one fanatical flatterer, 'did not wet.'

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'I once tried to make a play of such a garden,' Ned told her. 'There was a statue in it so beautiful that the King commanded it should come to life for one night for his pleasure. But the sculptor who made her also loved her, and wished to prevent it.'

'Which of them did she love when she came to life?'

'The King of course. All women would. So will you when you come to Court.'

'I will never love anyone but you.'

'A princess once told me that all who are in love believe that love lasts for ever.'

'Has yours for her lasted?'

'Yes, for she is dead.'

'Then I do not mind.'

They both laughed. They clung to each other. It was exquisite folly to pretend even for an instant they could part.

She lay back on the grass with her eyes shut, as still as if she had been thrown there, yet how quickly she would spring into life when she moved again. He had compared her with Cockney Nelly; now he thought that if she had been bred in a court she might have been a little like Madame Henriette, but he did not say so.

Madame was a face seen in the wood when he was a boy. He had promised to write a tragedy for her. She had died young, and his mother had said he would have

his love safe now for ever. These things were too sad and remote to tell Nan.

‘What are you thinking?’ he asked.

‘Is it true that however far you walk you will never come to the edge of the world and look over into nothing?’

‘Yes, for I have watched a ship come up over the edge of the sea, and first of all come the masts and sails, and last the hulk, just as though it were climbing a hill. That proves it. People have always seen that but they did not think before.’

She had never seen the sea. So the world was round, he said, and had a little flat place at top and bottom, just like an orange.

But she had never seen an orange. He would give her one, he would give her the world if he could. She was made for the world and it for her.

‘You have promised it to me,’ she cried, and clapped her hands, for so had her father, and now she knew the promises would come true. The first time she had seen the world it had been out of her reach, a fruit unripe for her. Now it was ready for her plucking. With a flashing movement of her head into the sunlight, she turned and kissed him, and he caught her to him.

A bird with fluttering heart lay under his hand. A gipsy flung her arms round him and laughed. A wood

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nymph slid from his embrace and placed a foxglove bell between his lips when he thought to kiss her again. For a little time there was no world outside them and their love.

He came only once again to Cricketts, as a concession to Mr. Hambridge's importunities. He was served with a barbarous country drink called birch wine, surprisingly potent. Ned contrived to spill most of his, and had the pleasure of seeing his host asleep before long. As he tiptoed out into the hall, Nan's voice called low to him over the stairs. He saw her face peering down above the heavy banisters in the dusk; there was something strange and lovely in her appearance.

'Why do you stare so?' she asked as he approached her. 'Do you like this old dress I found in the lumber-room?'

'I thought you were a ghost,' he said, 'you looked like it, for no one wears a dress like that now.'

'A ghost? I do not want to be that.' A chill fell on their thoughts, that one day they must die.

'Sweet,' he said, 'so should I appear a ghost\* if someone were to see me in this dress fifty years hence.'

'Fifty years hence. That is a long time. What dress shall we wear then? But what dance shall I learn now?'

For he had promised to teach her, and no place in the

house could be quieter and better to their purpose than this long gallery, where the seven windows still showed a faint reflection of rose colour from the sunset. They stepped in and out of the squares of faint light between the shadow. But Ned was nervous. His dislike of the house returned to him. He would take her some day to Stoking Place on his horse and show her what was still there, and play the harpsichord for her to dance. There were so many things to do and say, there would never be time for them all.

She thought of the bright crowded room that she had seen, now lying nearly empty in the dusk, and she and Ned stepping up and down opposite each other, bowing and curtsying, seeing every movement that they made in the mirror with the green frame. She wanted so much to be there that she could not believe she would ever go again to Stoking.

But she went. They ran in and out of the rooms and up and down the corridors and numerous staircases; she saw a bed of crimson Genoa velvet, a rich and grotesque screen from Japan, bowls of brittle porcelain from the palace of an Emperor whose fingernails were a yard long, brought across the world to hold the English roses from the terrace outside. She took within her hand a twisted cone of paper covered with characters in red and black like no writing she had ever seen. Ned told her it was that of a Chinese

tea merchant who wrote from left to right, as witches cross themselves. But the Chinese were not necessarily magicians, and magic was one of the things no longer *à la mode*, now that science was proving the real world as marvellous as a sorcerer's dream. In all the centuries behind her, no one could ever have lived at so perfect a moment as this.

'And now let us see Old Rowley's crown in the cellar,' said Ned.

He told her of his disappointment over that and how it had stung him to write his most imprudent play and so got him exiled here. 'Towser bit me badly, but I can thank him for it now.'

Towser and Old Rowley and Mrs. B. or Mrs. Bitch, it must be a gay town, Nan thought, where everyone, even the King, was known by his or her nickname. But Towser was the name of a dog.

'And so he is, a snarling brute of a dog. That must have been the elderly long-nosed fellow you saw in the mirror playing the fiddle. He is Sir Roger L'Estrange who gives so much trouble by purifying the Press. Why did you not tap at the window that day?'

'I had no stockings.'

'Nor have half the maids of honour. It is a new economical fashion for those who cannot afford silk to show skin.'

She was not attending. He was surprised to see that

she had grown absent since his mention of Sir Roger, and wondered what memory he could have roused with that name.

The memory was that of Mr. Cork. He had already been gone far longer than he had thought. And a fish had leapt into the air to promise her she should be happy.

'Please God wherever he is, oh don't let him come back,' she prayed in her heart, and then she thought, 'it would be better if he were dead. Yes, if only he were dead it would all be so easy,' but she did not dare put that into the form of a prayer. Not unless she said it backwards as the witches do, and said it to the devil. It was as though a flash of lightning had disclosed her black and stormy heart. She ran to Ned and clung to him.

'Ned, dear Ned, you said that witches are no longer *à la mode*, did you not? Does that mean that there are much fewer of them now, that soon there may not be any?'

'Dear Heart, what is troubling you? I do not know if there are witches or not. Many learned doctors say there are, and some deny it. Since the Royal Society was started, only two old women have been burnt as witches, instead of the many hundreds in the Commonwealth, I think unjustly myself. But, Nan, why do you tremble? Do you fear that someone has bewitched you?'

She shook her head. She could not tell her terror of herself. She looked on Ned and drew comfort from his candid and sensitive face. He seemed to her to stand in a clearer and lighter world, a world of large windows, wax candles, polished floors, smooth silks, of scientific knowledge, of common sense, easy love and toleration, where darkness and error and old, unreasonable fears would all grope away. He would help her to reach this world where there would be no need either to hate or fear poor Mr. Cork. She knelt and hugged his knees, looking up into his face.

He was shocked, he tried to raise her. 'It is I should kneel to you,' he said.

'But oh!' she cried, 'I want to be like you. I wish I were you yourself, inside you, then I should be safe with you for ever. Why do you love me, you who know so many lovely ladies?'

He could find no compliments as when he had stood in this airy spot and watched Illa Lesbia feed her sparrows.

All the things that he had been busy on for years, the competition for success and favour, the danger of giving offence, the friendships of a few months, the love affairs of a few weeks or nights, were now of idle importance. He had known that desire for pleasures more than human that impels men towards religion or sorcery, drink or crime or madness, the love of



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danger or strangeness or wild nature. In this smooth bright room where he had sat and talked scandal with others, he had grown uneasily aware of the wind and growing night outside, and had fancied he saw the face of his desire.

It had not been fancy, it was Nan who had looked in on his glittering world, just as he had looked out on hers and longed for its dark freedom. Twice they had been within touching distance of each other and not known it.

He took both her hands and looking into the face that he had thought was a trick of light and shadow, a flying bird, or a leaf blown in the wind, he told her the words of the old poet:

Twice or thrice had I loved thee,  
Before I knew thy face or name;  
So in a voice, so in a shapelesse flame,  
Angells affect us oft and worship'd bee.

And she, caught by the inspiration of their love and his poetic fire, saw for the first time a form and meaning in her life. For this she was born, for this did she listen to her father's tales, watch by the roadside long ago in order to see the King come home and ride away over the hill, and wait and wait but never see him come back; for this did she look on the fire of London in the sky, marry, and go to Cricketts, near to Stoking, all that she might meet Ned and lie in his

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arms in the house that she had made, all unknowing, down by the stream.

She had forgotten Mr. Cork in her preliminaries. Now that Ned was her lover, she forgot that she had ever had another.

And he too thought their love had been planned from the beginning of their lives, perhaps of the world. He said, 'Eternity is not just a continuance of life. It is something round us and within us. If we have nothing of it here, we can have nothing of it hereafter. I think when I saw you through the window I saw all I have ever looked for, but I cannot tell you what that is.'

She drew back from him, her arms above her head. Her happiness was too great for her to hold. She did not wonder what he meant, he was speaking to her out of his heart, as he had never spoken to anyone, and her heart answered him without words, or knowledge of what he said.

She left him at the roadside, she climbed the wall of the vegetable garden and looked down the long path through the archway on to the lawn. She saw a tall black figure walking there, his eyes bent on the square black bows of his square black shoes as they went up and down, up and down, on the dim and shining grass. That was why she had thought of him. She had known

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all along that he would come back, that he would come back this evening.

She ran back behind the wall to the parsley bed, and pulled a sprig and munched it, saying to herself, 'There he is. There he is. Now what will you do?' She thought she would climb over the wall again and go round and enter the house from the front, and so meet him only when she came in to supper, when there would be Mr. Hambridge and perhaps Bess to protect her.

But she heard his steps going up and down, up and down, on the soft and dewy grass.

She stole up to the path again and peeped down through the arch just when his head was turned a little sideways as if looking through the arch. She did not know if he had seen her or not, but she dared not risk it. If he had caught sight of her there in the glimmering dusk among the gooseberry bushes, and she had not come forward, then he would know for sure that she had found her younger gayer lover as he had bidden her. And whatever happened, he must not know that.

She ran forward through the arch, throwing up her arms in the air.

'You have come back at last,' she cried. 'Why were you so long away? Did you amuse yourself or was it very serious all the time? Oh, I have so much to tell you.'

## NONE SO PRETTY

Each word rang with a silly tinkling sound in her ears. She could hear it ringing false. She looked up at him with bright eager eyes and saw him looking through them, through her, seeing everything she sought to conceal. She held her hands against her heart. She kept back the words that rose stammering and sobbing within her, but dared find no speech.

He was holding out to her a black box between his hands. Little pieces of mother-of-pearl were inlaid in it in the shape of butterflies and strange insects. In the deep twilight they shone as though bits from the new risen moon had been chipped off and embedded in the smooth black surface.

He was still looking at her. His eyes seemed deeper than ever in his head. She could not distinguish their expression. They were two pits of darkness beneath his brow.

‘I have brought you a box of tea.’ His voice sounded dry and dead, as though it had long been disused.

She took the box in her arms and bent her head over it so that he should not see her tears. She had never cried before except for fear or anger or her father’s death. But now she was crying for Mr. Cork, because he had not brought the box before, while she still loved him.

## NONE SO PRETTY

Bess said to her lord and lover, 'The chaplain's nose is out of joint and he don't know it.'

His answer was a smack across her mouth. About half an hour later he added, 'Why must women meddle? Leave him to smell out his own nose.'

She had already taken the hint given by his immediate response, and did not speak to Mr. Cork, much as she would have liked to revenge herself for being sent back to the Lodge at supper time now he was again at home.

Nor did any of the household give him any information that might, as they well knew, bring harm to Mrs. Anne.

But at his first sight of her, Mr. Cork had known that she had found her younger, gayer lover.

He hurried the knowledge underground, he watched and argued with himself, he carefully amassed a hundred proofs against it that only tortured him with uncertainty, giving him excuse to lie awake night after night to ask himself what he already knew.

He made a few tentative inquiries in the village, and learned that a strange gentleman had ridden over from Stoking once or twice to supper, but no one gave him any description of him, or told him if Nan had been present or not. His relations with the villagers were not such as to help him to ask. He mentioned it

to Nan in an elaborately careless fashion and a voice hoarse with nervousness, and she answered him in the same manner and a chirping falsetto.

'Oh yes, he and Mr. Hambridge pared the claws of a fighting-cock together and Mr. Hambridge said he did it vilely.'

They were both posturing and mumming. He would not submit himself to such indignity. He would not pry into her heart. She should open it of her own accord to him or not at all. For a moment he felt himself free to love her truly. The error and falsity of others were not his doing and should not therefore hurt him; his only part in the matter should be to help and heal where he could. Such love was as the love of God. He had failed as a man, he might still aspire to that.

He noticed that she was gentler with him, kinder and more concerned. She was more mature. His absence, perhaps even the presence of that popinjay, had taught her a greater regard for his qualities. Yes, he thought, her real love was for him, and only her lighter and unworthy fancy had gone out for a little time to some decked maypole, and now that he had long ago ridden back to Court, to a hundred other loves, she would forget him almost as fast as he had forgotten her.

It was necessary to tell himself this, to say amid his

## NONE SO PRETTY

crumbling hopes, 'At least I have not lived in vain. There is one creature that loves me.'

And looking on her face, he could believe it, for her eyes looked wistful, and he saw regret in them, the self-reproach that can mean the birth of a soul.

With this new and tenderer assurance, he could afford to be gentle. He asked nothing of her and did not even seek out her company too much. The scenes of recrimination and explanation that he had formerly courted, he now avoided as much as herself. Dread kept them both dumb.

She brought him tea in a glass goblet since they had no china dishes, and coaxed him to drink it, declaring it the most delicious, refreshing drink she had ever tasted, but she could not be sure that she had made it correctly. A Jesuit from China had said the hot water must not stay upon the tea-leaves any longer than you can say the Miserere Psalm very leisurely, but it proved too tedious a test. Nobody but she liked the tea. Mr. Hambridge spat it out, having scalded his tongue, and called it poison.

'How angry my mother would be if she saw me,' she said as she sipped and exclaimed in delight, 'though I am sure she would take a sup of it fast enough if no one were looking.'

It sounded like someone else speaking. He had never heard her talk so much like other women. She for her

## NONE SO PRETTY

part felt herself stifling. She had to go on being merry, being like herself, lest he should notice the difference; she had to force herself to keep still when he laid his hand on hers instead of jerking it away, she had to look into his sad and solemn face and know that she had of her own accord spoilt the gay plan of her life that had led her to Ned's arms. Mr. Cork had never been for her, and all she had had to do was to wait for Ned who had been coming towards her all the time. She did not see that that too was part of the plan, for it was not in her to wait.

She wished to tell all this to Ned, who understood everything so well that she had said more difficult and perplexing things to him than she had ever thought to herself. But as soon as she met him again, she forgot everything but that they were together. Even their plans for the future, for the lodging he would find for her in London as soon as he was able to return to Court, were a troublesome though necessary intrusion.

The present moment lasted all the hot summer, ripened into the fruits and mists of autumn, endured the early morning frosts, and still they did not realize that time was slipping from them, bringing the future to them

Bess looked at Mr. Cork with a leer in her sleepy



eyes. He knew that she had something to tell him but he would not ask her. Whatever he dreaded to hear would be doubly loathsome from such a source. He saw her standing in the doorway of the Lodge every time he came through the gates. He took to avoiding them and going round another way.

But her unspoken news had their effect. He found he could wait no longer in patience, he dared not question Nan but he began to urge his claims as a lover once again.

'You promised,' she said. 'That last night you said it should be for the last time. And you wished it too. I cannot change all over again just because you have done so.'

He noticed a wild and hysterical note in her pleading. Suspicion again reared its ugly head.

From now on a monster bore him company, whispered in his ear when he was alone, pointed at Nan when she spoke, bidding him note the thousand different airs and turns of speech she had acquired, and not from him; above all, her distaste for his near presence. At night he would wake suddenly, not knowing what had roused him, nor what it was that lay in wait for him in the dark region of his conscious mind. Then the memory would spring at him, he knew that he had been deserted, and wished that he had never woken.

## NONE SO PRETTY

‘Speak to me,’ he cried at last to her. ‘Tell me what it is that makes you different.’

He had met her in the garden. The dead leaves were falling fast, for it was already November. This time last year the fall of each leaf had brought them nearer to each other. The sparse beech-trees at the end of the churchyard had shone like gold that Sunday morning when he had preached his love to her, and she had listened to him as to an angel. It was on a night in December that she had come to him.

Now the turn of the year was separating them so fast that they seemed to be standing on either side of a flood which every moment grew wider, sweeping them apart.

She glanced at him, she was making up her mind to speak. The fear in her eyes made him feel sick with apprehension. ‘What can she say,’ he thought, ‘that I cannot prove myself man enough to bear? It is doubt that has made me craven.’

And he considered what he should hear, that she had been faithless to him, that she had taken another lover in the summer while he was away, and all the time his longing hurried other words in addition—‘He has gone back to the town. He has forgotten me among his other loves. I cannot forget him yet—but if you will wait——’

## NONE SO PRETTY

Nan said none of these things. She spoke so low and fast he could hardly catch the few words she threw at him. 'I am with child,' she said.

Then she saw the face of his monster grinning from his face. She thought that she had driven him mad, that he would kill her. She fell back from him against the fruit-trees on the wall, she covered her face with her hands and cried, 'It is your child.'

He said to himself, 'She is lying.' It would have been better if he had continued to know it. But his monster said, 'Why destroy your one chance of happiness? Snatch at it, hold it fast.'

So he forced himself to believe her, for he too was frightened at what he might become if deprived of this last secret resource for his proud and empty heart. He found himself putting answers into her mouth as he questioned her. That last night before he went away, it was then that she had conceived, for they had not met as lovers for long before then. Why had she not told him before? She did not know, she had been afraid, she had thought he was angry with her. And so she had turned against him, he believed this might be a natural condition of her state. He thrust his mind into a road it did not easily follow, he argued with himself that if she had been pregnant she could not so lightly have taken a casual lover. She had not then been faithless except perhaps in her wandering

## NONE SO PRETTY

fancy, he had tortured himself for nothing, it was his old failing, he could never believe that any good would come to him and so when it came he turned it to bad.

But nothing round him confirmed these reasonable hopes in his heart, it felt dull and leaden as he tried to reassure and comfort her, who greeted all his attempts at kindness with wild sobbing. It seemed they were bound together only to make each other unhappy.

Nan had told Mr. Cork because she might not be able to keep the secret much longer. Nurse had known for some time, Keziah had guessed.

Nurse had advised Nan to tell Mr. Cork the child was his, for there was no knowing what that one might do in a rage. She gave herself the more difficult task of trying to persuade Mr. Hambridge that it was his. She had an anxious moment of it, for he shut one eye very firmly when she spun him a yarn about his coming to his wife's bed one night when he was drunk. But after mature thought he opened it again, pressed a crown-piece into her hand and told her to tell that tale where she liked, and no other. This he thought was not a bad way of dispelling the prevalent doubts as to his virility.

'And a husband like yours,' said Nurse, 'is one that any young woman should thank all the saints for when

she is in such a fix as you.' All this talk about love here and love there, and what did it all amount to? Young women should know their own minds to start with and there was an end to it, for they could not both eat their cake and have it.

'No, but you can have another, and that is still better,' said Nan. The world had changed but Nurse could not understand that; she was still creaking out her old saws—'it's best to be off with the old love before you are on with the new.' Old loves did not matter in this new age, nor cakes once they were eaten. Everybody nowadays grabbed at what they wanted and dropped what they no longer wanted. Caution, forethought, and faithfulness were all very well for the old fogies, but loyalty had gone out of date as soon as people had discovered how little they got for it. Ned had said so and Ned knew the world.

'Nobody in the town remembers an obligation or a former love affair,' she quoted proudly, 'and that is where I shall soon be.'

'Yes, and when your fine lover forgets you too, where will you be then, Miss?'

'Ned will remember me all his life.'

'Then it's more than you deserve with all your chopping and changing.'

'Like old King Hal. He loved to chop and change, didn't he?'

## NONE SO PRETTY

Sing pretty Boleyn, poor pretty Boleyn,  
Off with her head and the next comes in.

Dear Nurse, don't look so solemn. You will be with me in London when I bear my child and you will finish my new dress that is still on the loom so that I can wear it at the christening. And my son shall be a courtier or else a traveller and discover countries no one has ever dreamed of, or perhaps he might even be King, for they say there might be another revolution after this reign and then you know anything may happen any minute. So it's one foot up and one foot down, and he shall be born in London town.'

She sang with happiness, she danced, she kissed Nurse, she showed her the bit in Ned's last letter, though Nurse could not read one word, where he told her that he had found the very place for her and Nurse to lodge, and would come again to Stoking with a hired carriage to take them both to London, for he must be with her when their child was born.

His dislike and dread of Cricketts had communicated itself to Nan. She too felt that her child must be born anywhere but there, that in London and with Ned they would be safe. It was a happy omen too that their child should be born in flight and exile from her home, even as Ned had been born on his parents' flight into France.

## NONE SO PRETTY

He had gone back to London as soon as it was permitted. He had written as often as he could send the letters. The pedlar or packman now had a secret mission for Nan as well as sometimes for the chaplain. Had it not been for Mr. Cork, she could not have read them, and despite her sympathy with this modern and forgetful age and its contempt for gratitude, this sometimes, for a few moments, could spoil her pleasure in them.

The shame of his own birth and botched upbringing had given parenthood a romantic value in the chaplain's eyes. He longed to protect his unacknowledged child, to help it in careful, unrequited ways, to find in its welfare some purpose less meagre than the schemings of his self-interest, the jealous agonies of a love compounded of lust and fear and tortured vanity. For his tenderness for Nan had long since departed. Sometimes, with that clear sight that left him little peace, he saw that all his desire of late had been to hurt her as she had hurt him. It was a relief to think of an affection that should be pure from all such alloy, the love of a parent for his child.

Yet he knew that doubt would twist that relation also.

His solitary pacings in the long corridor or in the garden now led him farther and faster afield. Through

## NONE SO PRETTY

that late autumn he would stride across country as though he would tear it; the brown earth and the birds in the sky could bring no peace to the gaunt black figure aimlessly hurrying over the fields.

Rambling through the wood one December afternoon, he followed the stream for some way, scrambling through the bushes in pursuit of he did not know what. He stumbled on to the roots of a great tree that had caused a natural hollow in the sloping ground. It had been roofed over by gipsies or wandering village boys, as he thought, with branches interwoven with bracken. There were holes in the roof, one side of it had fallen in; the autumn rains had made the green bower bedraggled, brown and sodden.

He peered in and saw black mud and a clump of livid toadstools, but stuck in each corner were bunches of shrivelled scarlet berries.

Something in this magpie decoration of the decayed, secret house, told him it was Nan's work. Some further fancy made his hands tremble, his face grim.

He fell on his knees, he searched the ground for some knot of ribbon, some trinket that might further betray her presence. He could find none, but against a root of the tree there was a flat stone which looked oddly to him. It seemed to have been placed there. He tugged at it and it came up easily enough with a squelching sound as of a hollow beneath. The mud



## NO ONE SO PRETTY

oozed from under it, he groped in it with his fingers, felt something hard, found its edges, and pulled up a box which at first he took for the box of tea he had given Nan. But on wiping away the mud he saw it to be a tin box such as was used in the kitchens. He tore it open and stood staring at some mildewed letters, a lock of fair hair, tied with a ribbon, and a round, discoloured, wizened object which had once been a gilded orange.

He sat on a root of the tree and read the letters through in the fading light. Then he put them back in the box, and carrying it under his arm he returned to the Manor as though devils pursued him. For the first time in his plotting life, he flung away all caution. He went straight into Nan's room. Nurse rushed to the door declaring that her mistress was ill and he must not enter. He seized her wrist and thrust her out, calling her bawd.

He turned on Nan who had risen from the curtained bed. The tallow candles were guttering in the draught and their yellow light played up and down on her pale, upturned face.

That very evening she and Nurse were to meet Ned's carriage on the road from Stoking. Since it had been decided, the suspense had made her feel very ill, but her hopes animated her with courage for the journey. The winter's wind that sobbed in the trees, her husband's

drunken snores in the hall below, her sickness and fears, were all part of some nightmare, from which she would presently awake to find herself living, as if for the first time, in a world where happy lovers were treated with tolerance.

Now she was confronted with her former lover's set and staring face.

She knew at that instant that it was her hope that was the idle dream, and this dark room the reality.

Yet still she fought her knowledge, and faced him with a despair that made her wild.

'What can you do to me?' she cried in answer to the accusations that fell on her, incoherent and horrible, an ugly heap of words.

She had never loved him, she did not fear him, she would escape in spite of him. So she told him in answer, and knew it to be false, that she might have escaped had she not of her own doing bound this man to her to be her jailer.

Even as she defied him, she clutched the bedpost, feeling herself grow helpless from the child within her. For this she was born, for this she had lain in Ned's arms, that she should bring her doom upon her. Terror and exultation filled her, for she was in possession of forces stronger than herself. She lifted her bowed head and looked at him, not seeing him. The knowledge of her fate had raised her to grandeur: she who had

## NONE SO PRETTY

been none so pretty, was, as he now saw, beautiful, for the first and last time in her brief, squandered life.

'This,' he thought, 'is the woman I love and have driven away.'

The revelation made him frantic. He wept, he cried that he had been to blame, that no woman could love him, and in the same instant he implored her to love him, to lie to him, to pretend to love him if only for a moment. He crawled at her feet and tried to kiss them. She looked at him, sick with horror. Once in the gallery he had offered to play with her as her father had done, and she had dreaded lest he should lose his dignity and be ridiculous. Her father could do anything, but not he. And now he had made himself a loathsome thing she could not bear to look on.

He saw her shudder and turn away. He got up slowly, staring at her. His face had grown quiet in hatred. He held out her secret box to her and began to open it.

At that, her sudden tormented beauty, her very life seemed to drop from her; she fell against the bed, a grey heap.

Wherever he went, there was confusion, panic. The uproar had spread all through the house, maids were running hither and thither, Keziah was sobbing in hysterics at the foot of the stairs. Two of the grooms had

## NONE SO PRETTY

run out to seek the village midwife; a third, yet more enterprising, had saddled a horse, and, carrying a storm-lantern, was galloping as fast as he could through the mud to fetch the nearest doctor. Everywhere they were saying that Mrs. Anne was in great danger for she had been brought to bed three months before her time.

Mr. Cork hurried through the corridors, up and down the stairs, on no errand, not knowing where he was going, what he was doing, seeing only the face of an unknown young man who waited somewhere in the wet darkness, and waited in vain.

'Long, long may her lover wait,' he said to himself over and over, humming the words in his head, as though they were the refrain of a song.

The child was born dead. All through the night, Nan cried deliriously that she must ride away to meet Ned, that she was going with him to London.

One foot up and one foot down,  
That's the way to London town.

She sang in a high, thin voice, and then she babbled that the world was round like an orange, and her love would give it her.

Towards morning she was quieter, and Nurse saw that her eyes were half open, gazing into the shadows at the foot of the bed. She spoke to her, but Nan did

## NONE SO PRETTY

not hear nor see her. Yet she was not unconscious, she saw the candlelight flicker on the bed curtains, she saw the pattern of a stag and of round tawny fruits that hung from leafy branches.

She thought there was someone waiting for her there by the foot of the bed. Then she saw that one of the fruits was leaning out from the curtains towards her and that it was a gilded orange. She tried to stretch out her hands to it, and Nurse heard her whisper, 'Give it me.' She took Nan in her arms and sobbed, 'My lamb, my pretty, my heart's love, what can I give you?'

But she knew that Nan could not hear her, that her thoughts were not with her, but with one or other of the men who had brought her death.

The shadow that lurked in the curtain at the foot of the bed stepped forward and its hand passed over Nan's face. It was not life that had been waiting for her all this time but death.

'Not life!' she cried in a voice so pierced with anguish that all who heard it shuddered. She fell back, she was dead.

'Not for this world,' Nurse was saying within the hour. 'Not life' were her last words they were. These men they're all alike, and my poor lamb is dead.' She wished that Nan could have loved her only, as she had loved Nan.

## NONE SO PRETTY

Mr. Cork was called upon by Lady Ingleby to write her daughter's epitaph. He complied. To recognize his love for the dead woman might well have driven him mad. He had perforce to persuade himself of his hate. It was not difficult. She had deceived and betrayed him, scorned him, withered all that was kind and noble in his nature. He had abased himself abjectly before her, 'but that was not myself,' his pride implored. Only such devils as women could make a man so poor a beast.

One virtue he might have discovered in her, that for a little time she had felt admiration for him and even affection. But this was not to be enumerated in the epitaph that was supposedly of her husband's writing; nor was it a safe subject for his own contemplation. One glimpse of it made him turn his eyes hurriedly away instead to all those virtues she did not possess. He would be generous then and heap them on her name.

He would call her fair, when never except for one hideous moment had she been beautiful; chaste, when in the first year of her wedded life she had possessed two lovers; wise, when no village half-wit could have shown more folly.

He would praise the unfeigned piety that could conceal her messages of love in his sermons, and her contempt of the world in whose frenzied pursuit she had sacrificed her life.

## NONE SO PRETTY

He began to write in feverish haste:

To the Pious Merrits of Mrs. Anne Hambridge  
In whose everlasting memory this is inscribed by her  
afflicted Husband.

She dyed in Childbed  
Ætat suæ 18.

Had Death's Impartial Hand Beene Aw'd to Spare  
The Chaste, the Wise, the Vertuous or ye Faire  
Had Unfeign'd Piety, Unbiass'd Truth  
Unboasted Charity, Unblemished Youth,  
Had all that's Purely Good the Powre to Save  
So Wish'd a Life from an Untimely Grave  
Sure she had yet survived: But Ah in Vaine  
Alas Wee doe her early fate Complaine  
The World's of Her, not she of it Bereaven  
She looked on't, liked it not and went to Heaven.

The last line gave him hysterical pleasure. Now  
he must include the bastard which she had passed off  
on two men as their own.

Goe pritty Babe and tell thy Happy Mother  
If thou hadst liv'd, thou hadst been such another.

Truth enough in that last line whatever there was in  
the rest.

Mr. Hambridge came himself for the epitaph, he  
was in such haste to prove to his mother-in-law  
that whatever talk there may have been, it was not  
due to any lack of appreciation on his part for his

wife. Mr. Cork offered to read it to him but he shook his head.

'She was an unlucky bitch, he said, 'what need for more words about it?'

It made him uncomfortable to see the chaplain there, scribbling away. These clever fellows were the devil, they would write you down as soon as cut you up. Nan had given good sport in her way, and now she was gone. Like all women she could not stay as she was, she changed things and then she went, and he was sorry, for though he had been glad of Mr. Cork's company at table before she came, he now felt he could not endure it. Such unaccustomed emotion, though to his conscious mind it amounted only to a strange dislike of Master Sourfaced Squaretoes, such as he seldom felt, made him uneasy and ashamed. He had to swagger, to reassert his manhood.

'And now I can have Bess to live in the house,' he said, 'which will save a mort of trouble.'

Mr. Cork smiled at the aptness of his own irony. 'This was how 'Wee doe her early fate Complaine.'

He knew now for ever that women were not for him, and could devote himself the more securely to his cause for that knowledge. He thought of Nan's unknown lover riding back to London, baulked of his tryst; he was probably even now relieved, would soon be thankful, that fate had rid him of such a foolish



embarrassment as to run away with a woman with child.

But in this he stretched his scorn too far, and pity, that insidious tormentor, once again caught him unawares. He would have taken care of her, if only she had loved him alone, as he had loved her.

Across the page whereon he had scribbled the trial attempts for his rhymes, the flourishing capitals, the crossed-out words, the superimposed virtues, he fancied he saw his own name in straggling, almost illegible characters, 'dere Mr. Corke;' and remembered Nan's sole petition to him, 'Praie doe not be angrie.'

Suddenly he knew that his anger had killed her, that his epitaph, written in anger, was more monstrous than his murder. He cried out that he must alter it, but Mr. Hambridge had left the room. Mr. Cork found himself alone.

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